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BLACK ARROW, THE AVENGER.

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NEW YORK:

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98 WILLIAM STREET.

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CHAPTER I.

RODER'S GANG.

THE scene is Texas; the time is somewhat less than half a century ago.

A young man stood with his back against a tree, at the edge of a grove of heavy timber. A tall young man, long-limbed, broad-shouldered and athletic, with no superfluous flesh upon his frame, which had been hardened and tempered by the labor and exposure of the chase. Not a handsome young man, and yet by no means ill-looking, with bright, keen eyes, and a daring, self-reliant expression of countenance. He was dressed in a coarse homespun hunting-shirt, with leggings and moccasins of deer-skin, and a felt hat, considerably worse for wear. Both his hands grasped the barrel of his rifle, the butt of which stood on the ground between his feet, and he gazed steadily, almost fiercely, at the group of seven men who confronted him.

In the group were two Mexicans and one Irishman, and the others were apparently Americans. There was no similarity in their attire, except that there was hardly a garment among them that was not more or less dilapidated. There was no similarity of form or feature; but all wore the same wild, restless, reckless, dogged look, hinting strongly at a companionship in crime. All were armed, and all were looking at the young man before them, with an expression in which displeasure was strongly mixed with wonder.

"I won't do it, boys, and that's enough," said he. "You must let me off from this."

"We can't take such an answer as that, Ben Blood, and you know it," replied a stout, grizzly-bearded man, whose look and tone of authority showed that he was the leader of the party.

"It's a good enough answer, I think. This will not be the first time that one of us has been let off from a job."

"True enough, in case of sickness, or some other good reason; but you have given no reason, and your conduct looks suspicious. I am afraid you have some reason that won't bear telling."

"I am not afraid to tell my reason, Captain Roder, and I am not ashamed of it. Colonel Landry has been very kind to me, and so has his wife. They have treated me as if I was a human being, as good as themselves, and I am thankful to them. I can't mix in any thing that is to injure them."

"Don't press him, captain. We all know that the colonel's daughter is a very pretty girl."

The last speaker was a young man who might have been called handsome, if the expression of his countenance had not been at times decidedly unpleasant. As he then spoke, he accompanied the remark with a sneering and malevolent glance at Ben Blood. His hair was coal-black and curling; but his eyes were blue, with a glitter like that of burnished steel. His personal appearance indicated that he paid as much attention to it as his purse and position would permit, and it was this trait that had procured for him the *sobriquet* of Fancy Charley, the only name by which he was known among his companions.

"It's not the girl, Charley," replied Roder. "Ben Blood don't fly at that kind of game."

"I have been thinking, Ben, for some time, that you are getting tired of us, that you want to quit us."

"I am willing to own that I am tired of this kind of life. I would feel better, I know, if I could settle down somewhere and behave myself, and live like white folks."

"Do you mean to say that we are not white folks?"

"I have heard somewhere of men whose hands were against everybody, and everybody's hands against them. That's the kind of folks we are—too much like red Injuns—and I would like to live in peace with the world."

"Do you remember your oath?"

"I remember it well enough, and I don't expect to break it; but it didn't bind me to keep at this business all my life."

"You know what will happen to the man who betrays us."

"I have not betrayed anybody, and I don't mean to. when I do, it will be time enough to talk about that. I don't want any thing to do with this job, and I won't have any thing to do with it, and that I say plainly, once for all."

"We will not press you, Ben, and you may go your way; but you had better be careful which way you go. When a man gets tired of us and our ways, the next thing I look for is, to see him turn traitor; but he had better not do that. Come, boys!"

The seven men turned and went away, without any more words, leaving Ben Blood standing with his back against a tree. He looked after them until they were out of sight, and then, leaning his head on his hands that grasped the muzzle of his rifle, stood silent and motionless for some minutes.

"I'll do it!" he said at last, raising his head with an air of determination. They may call me a traitor, if they find me out, and may do what they please; but I am quit of them from this day on."

He walked away at a swinging pace, and half an hour's travel brought him to a mansion which was a strange but not unpleasing compound of old and new styles of architecture, the main building being constructed of stone, but nearly concealed by wooden additions and extensions. In fact, it was Mexico, overlaid with the United States.

He hesitated a moment, before he opened the gate that led into the inclosure, and then stepped quickly to the house. A fine-looking gentleman, somewhat past middle age, who was sitting on the veranda with a paper in his hand, looked up as the hunter closed the gate.

"Glad to see you, Ben Blood," he said, as he rose from his seat. "Come in and take a chair. Wife! Rose! Here is our hunter friend come back!"

A beautiful girl of sixteen, with large dark eyes and wavy masses of black hair, ran out on the veranda, followed more slowly by a matronly lady.

"I am so glad!" exclaimed the girl. "I have been dying to see somebody."

"Perhaps, Rose, you are dying to get another beautiful panther-skin or some more feathers of the blue heron. For

my part, I am tired of salt meat, and long for some juicy venison; but my wife won't let me hunt, as she fears that my precious health would suffer. Sit down, Ben Blood, and tell me when you will undertake a grand hunt for the benefit of this starving family."

"I can't sit down, Colonel Landry," replied the hunter, "as I have no time to stay. I can't hunt for you to-day, and am afraid that I can never hunt for you any more. I have come on a business errand, and I must tell my errand and go."

"What is the matter, my friend? You look troubled. It must be something serious. Speak plainly. Perhaps I can help you."

"It is a matter that concerns yourself, Colonel Landry. I had rather speak to you alone, if you please."

"Very well. Take Rose into the house, my dear. Now, Ben Blood, let me know what the matter is."

"You will have to leave this place for a while, colonel. Paul Roder and his gang are after you."

"Roder's gang! What does this mean? What do they want? What grudge have they against me?"

"They want plunder, sir, if nothing worse, and there's a grudge out, too. Don't you remember the part you took against that half-breed fellow, who was caught stealing horses?"

"Yes."

"He was one of Roder's gang, and that gives them a grudge."

"Are you sure that they have threatened me, Ben Blood? When do they mean to come?"

"I know that they are after you, and that they will come to-night."

"I can't defend the place against them, and I must run away. What a country is this, where a man's life and property are at the mercy of a gang of outlaws! If there is not a change for the better before long, I must leave Texas. But I must do the best I can now. We will pack up such things as we can carry, and will go to Ferguson's ranch. How is it, Ben Blood, that you know so much about Roder's gang? Don't tell me unless you are willing to."

"I have no objection to telling you now; but I had rather the ladies wouldn't know it. I belong to that gang, Colonel

Landry. "That is, I did belong to it, until this morning. I have quit them, and will never have any thing to do with them again."

"If they should find out that you have told me about this matter it would be apt to go hard with you."

"It might; but I mean to leave the country. I must say good-by to you, Colonel Landry, and I hope you will tell the ladies that I wish them well. I have a fine panther-skin for Miss Rose, which I will try to send to her."

"Never mind it, Ben. I will tell them that you risked your life for us. It will not be safe for you to stay in the country after this. If you want any money, just name it to me."

"I want nothing, Colonel Landry, but your good-will, if you can give it to me."

"You have my best wishes, my friend, and I bid you God speed."

The hunter accepted the offered hand of Colonel Landry, and pressed it warmly. He then turned quickly away, and was soon out of sight of the mansion.

Ben Blood's next stopping-place was at a rude little cabin in the timber. It was his own; he had built it that he might have a shelter when resting from his hunting-excursions. It was a poor, cramped up affair; but it was his home, and he sighed as he thought of leaving it. Against the wall was stretched a large and splendid panther skin. This he took down, and set at work diligently to dress it.

To dress a fine skin, and to dress it neatly and well, is a task that requires considerable time, as well as labor and skill. The hunter was obliged to build a fire, in order to expedite his work. In the intervals of his task, while he was waiting for the skin to dry, he occupied himself in preparing food for his present needs and for his journey.

The night was well advanced when he had finished dressing the skin to his satisfaction, and had stretched it before the fire for a last drying. As it was quite dark, and he was weary, he concluded to sleep a few hours, and to start on his journey with the first light of the morning. He stretched himself out on a blanket in the corner of his cabin, and was soon asleep.

It would have been well for Ben Blood if he had taken the

advice of Colonel Landry, and had "never minded" the panther-skin. He lost, in dressing it for Rose Landry, several precious hours that might have placed him out of the reach of the remorseless and revengeful Roder's gang. As it was, when he stepped out of his cabin-door, in the gray of the early morning, he was at once surrounded and seized by them.

"I suppose you know well enough what's the matter," said Fancy Charley, sneering maliciously while he addressed the captive. "If you don't, we do, and that's enough for us. Were you such a fool as not to think that you would be watched, after what you said yesterday morning? You were well watched, and you were seen to go straight to Colonel Landry's house. It was easy enough to guess, then, why there was nobody at home when we called there last night."

"That's enough, Charley," interposed Paul Roder. "He knows that he is guilty, and I reckon he won't try to deny it. You have been tried and sentenced already, Ben Blood." You said, yesterday morning, that it would be time enough to talk about traitors when you had betrayed anybody. You will see that we don't talk much about such things—we act. Is there any thing you want to say, before you are punished?"

The prisoner was silent.

"He has nothing to say, and it is well for him that he holds his tongue. Lead him into the woods, Charley, and let him have his punishment. I reckon he will never try to betray Roder's gang again."

Paul Roder laughed sardonically, and his laugh was echoed by all except the prisoner, who, guarded by two of the gang, was led forward, silent and unresisting.

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CHAPTER II.

AN AFFRAY.

Two years have elapsed since Ben Blood was visited with the displeasure of the Roder gang. Settlers have been pouring into Texas, and some portions of the new republic (which is already knocking for admission at the door of the Great Republic) may be regarded as civilized; but the greater part is wilderness, destitute of law, a refuge for criminals, a paradise of evil-doers.

A board shanty, whitewashed, is situated on a prairie near a grove of timber. It is not the only board shanty in sight; for there are several other such structures, none of them whitewashed, and there are two more pretentious buildings, partially painted, with their gable-ends on the street carried up so as to show a false front, an easily discovered sham which has been fashionable in many ways.

The shanty which was first mentioned is more interesting at the moment than the two pretentious stores and the other board shanties. To judge by the numbers who are clustered in and about it, it might be supposed to be the nucleus of the settlement, which is known, temporarily, by the name of March's Settlement. The reason for this absorbing interest is found in the degenerate nature of unregenerate man; the building not only contains a whisky-shop, but a *monté*-table in full blast.

The dealer at the *monté*-table, and the proprietor of the establishment, was a young man of handsome features, but with a sinister and unpleasant expression. His dress was costly, but hardly elegant. A diamond-pin sparkled in his necktie, diamond studs adorned his shirt-bosom, and diamond rings glistened on his fingers—all of which may have been real, but were more probably paste. He was known as Charles St. Clair, a name which sounded very well, and which may have been the name by which he was christened (if he ever underwent that ceremony); but it might have been a name

which he had manufactured to suit his appearance and position.

There were some forty or fifty men in and about the building. Most of them were rough in dress and in manners; a few were flashily attired, and fewer still had the appearance of gentlemen. Of this motley group we will at present notice only two.

One sat near the door, in a corner of the room, at the end of a long bench, and was evidently a locker-on, taking no interest in the game or in the commodities that were dispensed at the bar. He was a tall and well-formed man, showing a good muscular development. His heavily-bearded face was not handsome, and was rendered really ugly by a scar on his left cheek, extending from the eye to the corner of the mouth, and by the absence of his right eye. Neither a scar nor a missing eye was a very remarkable feature in Texas at that time, as cutting and gouging were among the first of the fine arts introduced by American civilization; but this scar was a livid, unpleasant scar, and there was a cavernous cavity where the eye should have been. In justice to the stranger it must be said that he wore a black patch, or shade, over the latter feature; but he was in the habit of lifting it, now and then, as if the cavity needed air. He was dressed in black broadcloth and a black felt hat, his coat being a single-breasted garment, buttoning up to the chin. This would have given him the appearance of a stray colporteur, or the missionary of some New-Light church, had not its effects been counteracted by his very swarthy complexion, and by his abundant black hair, which fell down his shoulders in wild and heavy masses. As this man was a stranger in March's Settlement, we will not give his name, unless it shall suit his own pleasure to mention it.

The other person to be noticed occupied a stool near the stranger, a few steps from the *monté*-table, and he watched the game with great interest, although he did not participate in the betting. He was, apparently, a few years beyond his majority, and was decidedly a handsome young man, with a frank, open countenance, and a good-humored, though fearless and resolute expression. He was neatly and tastefully dressed, in a brown cut-away coat and gray pantaloons, with a plain

gold watch-guard crossing his breast. His light hair was covered with a cloth cap. A silky mustache just shaded his upper lip. This young gentleman was George Warner, a late arrival from "the States." He was staying at the plantation of Colonel Landry, near March's Settlement, and was supposed, in the slang of the settlement, to be "sweet on" the colonel's very pretty daughter.

As George Warner sat watching the game of *monté*, there came to him a big, bony, rough, brutal-looking fellow, who had "hoisted in" as much blue ruin as he could conveniently stagger under, and whose belligerent propensities were thereby excited to such a degree, that it became necessary to his peace of mind to pick a quarrel with somebody.

This individual pounced upon Warner for his subject, believing him to be a stranger and lawful game. He planted himself in front of the young gentleman, standing wide apart, that he might better preserve his balance, and commenced his warlike overtures by flourishing his fist in Warner's face.

"I say, young chap!" he exclaimed, "I am the best man in this neck of woods, by a long jump!"

Warner glanced at him in silence, and continued to watch the game.

"I say!—you young cuss!—I am a-speakin' to you. Why don't you listen to me?"

"What do you want?" asked Warner, looking up.

"I say I'm jest the best man in this hyar neck of timmer, by a long jump."

"Glad to hear it. Good men are so scarce, and rascals are so plenty, that it gives me great pleasure to meet such a paragon as yourself."

"I've heerd a heap of cuss talk, and have been called abundance of hard names; but I'll be everlastin'ly dogoned if this ain't the fust time I was ever called a pollygon. What do you mean by that, you little cuss?"

"I mean that I am glad to meet such a good man in this country. You are a Christian, of course, a pious man, with no harm in you—in fact, a *rara avis in terra*."

"I'll let you know that I don't allow any son of a gun to talk Dutch to me. You've got to take that back, you contemptible pup, or I'll knock the daylight out of you."

"I am afraid that you are not as good a man as you boast yourself to be," replied Warner, with a very perceptible sneer.

"I can jest whip any man in this neck of timmer, and hyar goes to smash your purty pictur'!"

The young gentleman arose quickly from his seat, catching on his left arm the blow that was intended for his head, and launching out his right like a catapult. The blow was a center shot, striking the ruffian under the left eye, starting the blood in a stream, and felling him like an ox. As the fallen man did not move, Warner turned to leave the room.

This little by-play was hardly worth notice in such a place and in such company. The *monté* players continued their game without noticing what had happened, and the loungers, with one exception, merely glanced at the fracas, without taking any further interest in it.

The one exception was a sturdy, thick-set man, with grizzled hair and beard, who drew a bowie-knife, and rushed at Warner with vengeful intent. The young gentleman, taken off his guard, would probably have fallen a victim to the keen edge of the murderous knife, had it not been for the prompt intervention of the stranger in broadcloth. This man stopped the career of the assailant by fastening a firm grip on the collar of his coat. He then swung him around, as if he had been a boy, and whirled him out at the door, where he fell on his face. He picked up himself and his knife, and walked away after casting back a malicious glance into the room. The fallen ruffian also arose, and quietly slinked away.

"I reckon you had better be getting away from here, stranger," said one who had the appearance of a gentleman, stepping up to the man in broadcloth. "That was Paul Roder, and the man who was knocked down was one of his gang."

"Roder's gang!" ejaculated the stranger, with a peculiar look. "I have heard that they are dangerous men."

"That's just what they are. They have gone to arm themselves and to get their friends. They may double teams on you and use you up."

"Thank you. I had better be moving, I suppose. If I should have to fight, I had rather fight on ground of my own choosing."

With these words the stranger stepped out of the door.

George Warner, after waiting a few moments, also left the shanty.

The road that he followed, leading toward the north-east, took him through a grove of heavy timber, and it was nearly dusk when he entered the timber. He had got about three hundred yards from the shanty, when he caught sight of three men before him. Two of them he recognized as Paul Roder and his late assailant. They were walking rapidly, and Warner conjectured that it was their intention to overtake the stranger who had so opportunely come to his assistance. He turned off into the timber, determined to keep the men in view, and to defeat their object if possible.

He had nearly caught up with them, when he was stopped, as well as they, by a hail in front.

"Halt there!" said the voice. "If you come a step further, Paul Roder, you are a dead man. I have got a bead on you, and will drop you in your tracks."

Roder looked in the direction from which the voice proceeded, and George Warner also looked. He saw a rifle-barrel held against the trunk of a large tree, and he knew that the man who held it was well covered. He thought it best to take part in the parley, and stepped behind a tree, drawing a pair of Derringer pistols.

"Go back, Paul Roder!" said the stranger. "You have no cause to hunt me, and it is not a safe thing to do. You had better take fair warning."

"That's a fact, Paul Roder!" said Warner. "If that rifle is not enough, my Derringers are safe for two of you. You had better take fair warning and go."

The ruffians were evidently taken aback. After whispering together, they turned and walked back toward the settlement. Warner, fearing treachery, kept his tree between him and them, and the rifle-barrel was pointed at them until they were out of sight. Then the young gentleman stepped out into the road, and joined the stranger.

"I think we will not be troubled any more by those people to-night," he said.

"Perhaps not; but I mean to keep one of my eyes in the back of my head."

"I must thank you for coming to my rescue when Paul Roder drew his knife against me. He would have killed me, I think, if you had not interfered."

"He looked as if he meant to; but you don't owe me any thanks for that."

"It was because you helped me that Roder followed you to kill you. He would hardly dare to harm me, except in a moment of passion, as I have influential friends here; but you are a stranger. You have not been long in the neighborhood, I suppose."

"Not long."

"Have you any friends here?"

"None that I know of. But that's no matter. There's a chance that I may turn out to be too much for Paul Roder, myself, before I am done with him."

"He is a dangerous man, and his gang is the terror of the country."

"All things have an end, and their time may come."

"I will be glad if you will allow me to call myself your friend, and I hope you will not think me inquisitive if I ask you where you mean to stop to-night."

"To stop? You want to know where I mean to camp? That's more than I know myself. I have a horse not far from here, and we generally camp near wood and water."

"I will take it as favor if you will go home with me."

"Home is a word I scarcely know the meaning of. Where do you live?"

"With Colonel Landry. His plantation is not a quarter of a mile from here."

"I will go there with you, if you wish. I have heard that Colonel Landry is a good man, and I would be glad to see him. But I must first go and get my horse."

"I will go with you. And now, as we have become so far acquainted, I must ask your name."

"My name is Nathaniel Whetstone, and I have generally been called Nat Whetstone. What is yours?"

"George Warner."

Nat Whetstone started, and looked so strangely at his companion, that the latter asked him if the name was familiar to him."

"Not familiar; but I've heard it somewhere. Are you from the States?"

"From Mississippi."

"Old Mississippi! It's a fine State, I've heard, and I should like mightily to see it. I am glad that I have met you, George Warner, and I will go with you to Colonel Landry's house right willingly, if you will walk with me to get my horse."

George Warner wondered at the strange language and conduct of his companion, but followed him without further remark.

They had been walking in the road during their conversation; but at this point they turned off into the woods. Whetstone led the way to a ravine in which his horse was picketed feeding on the plentiful grass. Warner noticed that the horse was a mustang, and that the saddle on his back was an Indian saddle; but there was nothing unusual in these particulars.

Whetstone unpicketed the horse, coiled and secured his lariat, took the bridle in his hand, and walked with his companion to Colonel Landry's plantation.

CHAPTER III.

WHO WAS BEN BLOOD?

It was dark when George Warner and his new friend reached the mansion of Colonel Landry; but there were lights in the windows, and voices of welcome were heard in response to the young gentleman's hail.

There was more of a welcome than words alone could give. A pattering of feet was heard on the walk, as a girl ran down to meet the late comer. It was Rose Landry, with a beauty more natural and attractive than had been hers two years before, and with a love-light in her eyes which Nat Whetstone, bronzed and ugly as he was, could not fail to observe and appreciate.

"Why, George! dear George!" she exclaimed. "Why have you come so late? We have been very uneasy about you, and I have worried myself nearly to death."

Her voice dropped as she saw the stranger, and she stopped and blushed.

"I have been detained a little," replied Warner; "but I am safe and sound, as you see."

He called a negro boy, to whom he gave Whetstone's horse in charge, and led the way to the house. Rose preceded them, looking back every now and then, as if to make sure that her lover was really safe.

Colonel Landry and his wife were met in the sitting-room, two years older than when we made their acquaintance; but showing no evidence in their appearance of the lapse of two years.

Warner introduced his friend, who went through the ceremony of introduction rather awkwardly, and Mrs. Landry informed them that supper was ready and waiting. George declared that he had had nothing to eat since breakfast, and that he doubted whether his friend had fared any better. The young gentleman proved the truth of his statement, as regarded himself, by eating as if he was famished; but Whetstone appeared to have but little appetite, and his eyes (or eye) kept straying around the table, resting, with a peculiar expression, now on Colonel Landry and his wife, and then on Rose and George Warner. He spoke only when he was spoken to, using his words with rare economy, and vouchsafing little information in reply to the questions that were addressed to him.

Colonel Landry, if he had expressed his opinion, would then have said that he did not like the look of the stranger; his wife did not approve of Whetstone's style of staring about the table; and Rose considered him an unpleasant, if not a frightful object, especially when he lifted the patch that shrouded the cavity of his right eye.

George Warner, however, was loud in the praise of his new friend. He related his adventure at St. Clair's shanty, and declared that his life would have been lost, if it had not been for Whetstone's prompt and effectual aid. Rose turned pale and trembled at this narration, and, as George commended the stranger, looked upon him with more favorable eyes; but her father shook his head solemnly.

"I am glad that you are safe, George," he said; "and am

deeply grateful to Mr. Whetstone for having rescued you from such a danger. I am only sorry that the necessity should have occurred. I feel it my duty to say that that saloon, as some people call it, is not a proper place for a young gentleman, and particularly for your father's son. I am sure, if he were living, that he would be sorry to hear that you had entered such a place."

"But I was neither gambling or drinking, sir. I was only looking on."

"I am glad of that; but I am bound to believe that you had no business there. There are always roughs and drunken men at such a place, and there is always danger of a collision."

"This is a rough country, sir, and we are obliged to associate with many rough people. If I should not do so, they would call me 'stuck-up,' and would hate me. It seems to me that it is best to keep on good terms with them, and to mingle with them on something like a footing of equality. Some of the best men in the settlement were there to-day."

"All the worse for them. I can not see the necessity, George, that would take you to such a place. Your experience has shown you that there is danger of a collision, and your life has been, as you admit, in imminent peril. You have come out safely so far; but I am afraid the trouble is not ended. There is no telling to what that affray may lead. Roder's gang are dangerous men—very dangerous men."

"Very true, sir; but I am sure that I will not knuckle to them. It is strange that they have never molested you. I am sure that they dislike you."

"They have never troubled me but once," replied Colonel Landry, with some hesitation. "That was about two years ago. They threatened to pay me a visit, and did so; but they found me absent. I had been warned of their intention by a hunter named Ben Blood."

George Warner started, and Nat Whetstone looked up.

"Ben Blood!" exclaimed the young gentleman. "Who was he?"

"I have told you his name, and I know little more about him. He was a hunter, a poor fellow to whom I had taken

a liking, and his friendship for me, I suppose, was the cause of his death."

"How was that?"

"It seems that he was one of Roder's gang, although he had determined to quit them, as he told me when he warned me of their intentions against me. I suppose they discovered, or suspected what he had done, and that they killed him as a punishment for his treachery. I left the plantation after the warning, because I was unable to resist them, but returned with a band of men and discovered that they had plundered my house. I went to Blood's cabin, and found it deserted. I supposed that he had left the country, as he had said he meant to do, and I would have been satisfied, if we had not perceived a number of tracks about the door. We followed the tracks into the woods, and there we found marks of a scuffle and a pool of blood, leaving us in no doubt that the poor fellow had been taken out of his cabin and murdered."

"Was nothing done about it?" asked Warner.

"What could be done? We could trace the crime to no one. We could not even find the body. Besides, Roder's gang were too powerful for the law at that time, and I must confess that they don't seem to have grown much weaker."

"The name of that hunter is not a singular one, Colonel Landry, nor is it a common name. I wish you would describe him to me."

"Do you fancy that you may have met the man?"

"I had a half-brother named Ben Blood."

Colonel Landry's countenance showed his surprise, and Nat Whetstone bent one of his peculiar glances upon the young gentleman.

"I have never mentioned him to you, sir. You know that my mother was a widow when my father married her; but you may not have known that she had a son living. That son was Ben Blood, and he would be, if living, some seven or eight years older than I am. He became involved in a love affair, in which he had a rival, and the consequence was a quarrel and a fight. Ben stabbed his rival, left him for dead, and ran away. The wounded man recovered; but we heard nothing more of Ben, from that day to this."

"My hunter friend was a young man," said Colonel Landry,

"but had seen fully twenty-five years, I think. He was tall and well-made, not ill-looking, and decidedly not handsome. He had a good manner and a fair share of intelligence."

"It is more than possible that he was my brother; but I was quite young when Ben left Mississippi, and I do not remember him well. I know that I loved him because he was my mother's son, and my love for her was very great. Are you sure that the hunter was killed?"

"There can hardly be a doubt of it. Roder's gang are not men who do things by halves. It is quite certain that they took him out of his cabin. He had promised a panther-skin to Rose, and we found it there, newly dressed. I am afraid he had been working on it when he ought to have been making his escape. There it hangs, on the wall. There is a mournful interest attached to it, and Rose could not be induced to part with it."

All rose from the table, and Whetstone walked to the wall, took down the panther-skin and examined it.

"I'll warrant that you found this stretched before a fire," he said.

"We did," replied Colonel Landry. "How did you know that?"

"I have had some experience in dressing skins, and I can see that the work on this was not quite finished. It should have been well rubbed and softened after it had dried. If the young lady will permit me, I will put the skin in order for her."

"I am much obliged to you," replied Rose; "but I keep it in remembrance of poor Ben Blood, and I had rather have it just as it left his hands."

"If he was alive, Miss, and could hear you say that, he would be a proud man."

There was a cloud over George Warner that night. He asked Colonel Landry many questions concerning the murdered Ben Blood, and became convinced that the victim of the vengeance of Roder's gang was none other than his missing half-brother. The more he thought and spoke upon this subject, the more gloomy he became, and even the gentle blandishments of Rose could not rouse him from his melancholy.

"Ben Blood was my mother's son," he said, "and I loved

him as if he was my own brother. He was never bad at heart, although he may have been in some way connected with a band of desperadoes. He felt himself to be an outlaw, not knowing that the man had survived whom he thought he had killed. If it is true—and I will find out in one way or another, whether it is true or not—that he was murdered by Roder's gang, I swear upon Rose's panther-skin—a sacred relic now—that I will avenge his death upon them!"

"Be careful what you say," suggested Colonel Landry. "There is a stranger here?"

"It is true that I am a stranger," said Nat Whetstone; "but, if the young gentleman is in earnest, and if he will accept my aid, I will help him in this matter."

"I do not regard you as a stranger," replied George. "I thank you for your offer and gladly accept it."

"I hope you will not run into danger," said the colonel. "Remember Rose."

"I will remember Rose, sir, and I will act cautiously and prudently. The time is coming when that gang of cut-throats will no longer be a terror to peaceable citizens. Other neighborhoods have had vigilance committees, and we will have ours. In fact, Colonel Landry, it is nearly ready to act, and the members will expect your sympathy and aid."

Colonel Landry looked astonished, but made no reply, and soon all retired for the night, Whetstone occupying a bed in George Warner's room.

Warner and his new friend were out early in the morning. When the former came down-stairs he was met by Rose, who told him that she had passed a sleepless night, thinking of him and the dangerous position in which he was placing himself.

"I will be careful," he replied, "for your sake, if not for my own. Whetstone has promised to help me, and I am sure that he will keep his promise. He will be a splendid ally."

"He is a stranger, George, or almost a stranger."

"He is not a stranger to me. It is true that I am but slightly acquainted with him; yet I feel drawn to him as if I had known him a long time. He has a strong arm, is fearless, and I believe him to be a good man."

"I hope you are right, but am not sure. I thought he was very ugly, and was afraid of him, until I heard him promise to stand by you."

"Did that change his looks? I don't think he was always so ugly as he now seems to be. He has been unfortunate. I will tell you one thing that I learned last night, if you will promise not to repeat it. It is not a very great secret, perhaps; but he might not like to have it known."

"Of course I will promise. What is it?"

George bent down and whispered in her ear.

"Why, George, that is terrible. Poor fellow! Did he show it to you?"

"No. I saw it by accident, without his knowledge."

"I want to tell father."

"You have promised not to repeat it, and you must tell no one."

"I will keep the secret, if you say so. I am very sorry for him."

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAITOR'S FATE.

COLONEL LANDRY had an important communication to make to George Warner. He had not replied to the young gentleman's remark concerning a vigilance committee, for the reason that he had been surprised to learn that the same idea had been proposed and partly carried into operation by two distinct bodies of men, acting without the knowledge of each other. He did not know how far George might be speaking by authority, and was unwilling that any further disclosures should be made in the presence of the ladies and of a stranger.

A mutual explanation showed that Warner was connected with a band of young men who had formed a secret league for the purpose of breaking up Roder's gang of desperadoes, and that Colonel Landry was connected with a similiar association of older and wiser heads. Neither party was strong

enough, of itself, to accomplish the purpose; but it was thought that they might, if united, succeed in ridding that portion of Texas of organized ruffianism.

In the course of this conversation Colonel Landry made a confession that was rather humiliating. He admitted that he had been in the habit, since the attack of which he was warned by Ben Blood, of paying a certain sum half-yearly to Paul Roder as the chief of his gang, as tribute or ransom money, by which payment he was secured from molestation. In accordance with the wishes of the gentlemen with whom he had associated himself, he had decided to discontinue the payment, and had sent Roder notice to that effect. This was the first overt act of hostility.

"It was for Rosa," he said. "It was for her sake that I made the arrangement with Roder. When I thought of her I was really afraid. I could not have protected her against those brutal outlaws, and I am convinced that I acted wisely in purchasing peace. It is impossible to say to what lengths they might have gone, in attempting to extort money from me."

"I am not blaming you, sir. I am only sorry that the necessity for such a course should have arisen. Are you not afraid, now, that Roder may resent the notice you have given, and may take occasion to molest you again?"

There is danger that he may give trouble, and it is for that reason that I am glad to hear of the determination of the young men. The two organizations must come together, and an efficient plan of action must be adopted, or our condition will be worse than it was before."

Warner proposed that Nat Whetstone should be admitted to their deliberations; but the old gentleman objected to this, urging that as they yet knew little about him, and that it would not be proper to trust him so far on such short acquaintance. George thought that he could answer for his new friend, and it was finally agreed that the matter should be referred to the joint committees, who were to be brought together as soon as possible.

At this point in the conversation, the person of whom they had been speaking came in, and announced that he was about to leave.

George advised him to be careful about coming into collision with Roder's gang, and requested him to return to dinner. Colonel Landry seconded the request.

Whetstone promised to act with proper caution. He was only going to stroll about, he said, to see what was to be seen, and he would be happy, with the permission of Colonel Landry, to call at the house again.

As he mounted his horse and rode away, his appearance was noticeably different from that which he had worn the preceding day. His solitary eye was brighter, and there was an air of dignity as well as determination about him, that well became him, and that rendered the uncomeliness of his features less apparent.

He rode into the woods, picketed his horse in the same ravine from which he had taken him the previous evening, and from there walked direct to Charles St. Clair's shanty.

He found the proprietor alone in that establishment, sitting at a table, shuffling some cards, and apparently studying their combinations. His barkeeper was outside the door, with his chair tilted back against the building, sunning himself and waiting for custom. Custom was by no means plentiful in the "saloon" at that hour. The regular *habitués* had taken their morning "nips" and gone their several ways, and only now and then a loungeer dropped in to drive "another nail" in his coffin. It was not until afternoon that playing commenced, and from then until midnight the excitement was on the ascending scale.

"Have a game?" asked St. Clair, as the stranger seated himself near the table.

"No, thank you. I don't know how to play. Wish I did. It looks like an easy way of making money."

"Not so easy as you think, if you really know nothing about it. A person must learn, and that takes time and study."

"When you have once learned the tricks it is easy enough, I reckon."

"Easy to play, perhaps, but not always easy to win. A man must lose sometimes, you know."

"Some may; but you don't lose—do you?"

"I have seen the time, more than once, when I have been completely cleaned out."

"But you make up for it, and you win in the long run. I wish that I had sense enough to make money in some such easy way."

"There are more easy ways than one to make money. Look here!—ain't you one of the men who had a little fuss here last evening?"

"There was something of the kind. I saw a man with a knife drawn, and I hoisted him out of the door, for fear he might hurt somebody."

"Didn't he follow you to get even?"

"Yes, and two others with him."

"What did you do? Weren't you afraid?"

"Afraid! I started in to study dictionary once, stranger, but I didn't get as far as that word. I gave them to understand that it wouldn't be healthy for them to go any further, as they might get a dose of something that might not agree with them."

"They may bounce you again. You had better look out."

"I always am looking out."

"You speak of easy ways of making money, as if you had been used to hard ways. Where do you come from?"

"The mountains. I've roughed it for a long time, and have seen only the hard side of every thing. I've always found it a heap easier to spend money than to make it."

"When I first noticed you, I thought you might be a priest."

"A priest!"

"Yes—from the cut of your coat."

"I wonder what the man who used to own the coat would think, if he should see me in it."

"What has become of him?"

"The fool wanted to keep the coat and the rest of his plunder," replied Whetstone, with a hard laugh. "He fought me for it; but he didn't win that fight. Fighting didn't agree with him, I reckon; for he died rather suddenly."

"A man who can get property in that style ought not to be troubled to find an easy way of making a living. You seem to have a stout arm and a stout heart. If you are the sort of man I think you are, I can put you in the way of doing something."

"I may say, between you and me, that if I can get money, I don't care much how I get it."

"There are some men about here who are getting rich by finding things, as you found your coat. They rule the country, and have every thing their own way. There is no law here to trouble them. If there was any law, it would not dare to touch them. How would it suit you to join them?"

"Nothing better, if I can get my share of what's going."

"Once in, you would have to stay in. If you should go back on them, you had better wish the red-skins had you."

"I would be sure to stay where the money was."

"They need a few more men, and I will speak to them about you. Here comes one of them, now. You needn't handle your rifle. I will see that you are safe."

It was Paul Roder who entered the "saloon," followed by the barkeeper, whom he had aroused from a doze. As his eyes fell on his antagonist of the previous evening, he muttered an oath, and drew a pistol from his belt. Whetstone was equally ready with his rifle; but St. Clair at once sprung between them, and seized Roder by the arm.

"Don't shoot, captain!" he exclaimed. "This man is my friend and yours."

"He had a strange way of showing his friendship when he pitched into me last evening," replied Roder.

"You went in as if it was a free fight," said Whetstone, "and I allowed I might as well take a hand."

"He is a friend, I tell you," replied St. Clair. "He is all right, and he is willing to join us. You know, captain, that we want men, and here is one with a stout arm and a stout heart."

"I have good reason to know that his arm is stout. I never had but one grip hold of me that was as hard as his."

"Whose was that?" asked Whetstone.

"Never mind now. If you train in our company, you will find out something about him afore long. Fancy Charley, here, knows men, if anybody does. When he says a man is all right, he knows what he's talking about. I don't bear grudges, and here's my hand to prove it. Come and help me h'ist in a little p'ison."

After paying their respects to the bar, the trio seated themselves, and conversed for half an hour. The result of the

conversation was an agreement that Nat Whetstone should become a member of Roder's gang, entitled to the privileges and subject to the duties and penalties of such membership.

That night Charles St. Clair left his "saloon" in charge of his barkeeper, mounted his horse, and rode away, accompanied by Whetstone.

They rode until they reached a small and rude cabin, far in the timber. As they approached they were halted by a sentinel. The response of St. Clair to the hail being satisfactory, they dismounted and entered the hut, where they found a dozen armed men assembled. Among them was Paul Roder, who greeted the new-comers, and introduced Whetstone to the conclave.

The neophyte was soon initiated, and a terrible oath was administered, after which the captain proceeded to make him acquainted with his duties, and especially with the punishment that would be inflicted upon him in case he should attempt to play the part of a traitor.

"We never had but one man who went back on us," said Roder, "and his wasn't what you might call a bad case; but we made an example of him, as a sort of lesson and warning to the rest."

"Who was he?" asked Whetstone.

"His name was Ben Blood, and he was a right likely chap—the same man I spoke to you about, who had such a hard grip. He had got in with Colonel Landry, who lives here, and had taken a notion to quitting us. It so happened that we had arranged to clean out the colonel's ranch one night, when we were sure of a big haul. Ben Blood refused to have any thing to do with the job, and we had to let him off. Fancy Charley, here, was sure that he meant to give the colonel a hint; so he watched him, and saw him go to the house. When we visited the ranch that night, and found the folks all away, we knew what the matter was, and we hunted up the traitor. We found him in this very cabin, getting ready to leave the country. We surrounded the cabin, and waited until morning, when we took him as soon as he poked his nose out, and carried him off and settled him."

"What did you do?"

"Well—such an unmerciful whipping as we gave that chap

was rather more than one man can stand up under. When he came to, a Mexican who was with us—he's gone under since that—had scooped out one of his eyes. And that wasn't the worst of it."

"What then?"

"We sculped him!"

"Was he dead?"

"Dead! Not a bit of it. We waited till he was wide awake enough to know what was going on, and then we raised his ha'r. That's his sculp, hanging up yonder."

Whetstone shuddered visibly, and looked at the wall, where he saw a dried scalp, covered with long black hair, nailed against a log.

"Did you kill him then?" he asked.

"No—and that's the beauty of it. We left him to die in his own way."

"Could he have lived?"

"There was a splinter of a chance, maybe, worth as much as a butterfly's chance in a hail-storm. He crawled off a little—some of the boys said—they didn't follow the trail; but the buzzards soon got him, of course."

"It was a hard fate."

"It was *that*. We did it for a lesson and warning. You know, now, how we would take your sculp if you should go back on us."

"You will be welcome to mine. Are all the men here now who were here then?"

"Two have gone under—Bill Routh and the Mexican. The rest are here. Now, boys, let us talk business a little. Do you know that some men are trying to get up a vigilance committee against us?"

No one had heard of it.

"They are mighty sly about it; but they can't fool old Roder. He knows as much about their plans as they know themselves. That's one thing we've got to look out for. Colonel Landry belongs to the committee, of course; for he has given me notice that he means to quit paying us."

St. Clair jumped to his feet with a joyful exclamation.

"Suits you, Charley—does it?"

"You may bet it does. You know that I would have

paid more than he paid, if you had only let me have my way."

"That's all square; but I had passed my word to the old man that he shouldn't be molested so long as he paid. You will have your chance now, Charley, and you won't find your friends backward in helping you. Colonel Landry thinks his vigilance committee is stronger than we are; but he will learn better before we are done with him."

After some further "business" the meeting broke up, and the band separated.

"To-morrow night we will be here again," said Roder to Whetstone, "and we will expect you."

"All right," replied the new member. "You may depend upon me."

CHAPTER V.

A CHAPTER OF INCIDENTS.

THE next night there was a meeting at Ferguson's ranch, which was numerously attended by gentlemen from various parts of Texas, some of whom resided more than fifty miles from March's Settlement. The object of the assemblage was the forming of a vigilance committee, for the purpose of stopping the depredations of Roder's gang, and of rendering life and property more secure in northern Texas. The meeting was as private and secret as possible, none being admitted but men who were believed to be friendly to the cause, and whose discretion could be relied upon.

Colonel Landry was present at the meeting at Ferguson's ranch. George Warner was there, and Nat Whetstone was there. The last-named individual was introduced and vouched for by his friend Warner. He was surely playing false with one party or the other, as Roder's gang met the same night at the little cabin in the woods, and Whetstone had promised to be present.

There was some comment among Roder's men upon the non-appearance of the new member of the gang; but Charles

St. Clair emphatically gave it as his opinion that the man was "all right," and Roder was not at all uneasy on the subject.

The vigilance committee was duly discussed, and Roder gave the information that he had gained, assuring the men that he would soon know more. What he already knew was not a little, and it would have surprised the members of the committee if they could have heard him tell their names and explain their plans so accurately. The men whose names he mentioned were "spotted" as objects of vengeance, and the gang proceeded to talk of their own projects.

One of these was of great interest to St. Clair, to judge by his excitement when it was mentioned, and the eagerness with which he discussed it. When the details were arranged, and it was announced that the project was to be executed immediately, he was in high glee, and announced his intention of giving a "grand blow-out" to all who should be concerned in it.

"It suits me exactly, captain," he said. "It will be the best thing we have done yet."

"I don't know about that. There ain't much pay in it, as I see; but it will give those vigilance folks to understand that we ain't afraid of 'em, and it may scare them off the track."

"If it don't pay, you may have my head for a football. You do the work, and I will guarantee the pay."

"We will all be glad to please you, Charley, anyway. What is that noise at the door?"

There was a scratching against the rough door, followed by a moaning sound. The men looked at each other, and uneasy glances were cast at the door. Ignorance is superstitious, and guilt is not without its tremors.

"It's a dog, I suppose," replied St. Clair.

"I don't think a dog would be likely to come around here. It may be some one listening. Who is on watch to-night?"

"Jim Baker."

"Jim is a careful hand, and wouldn't be likely to allow any man to come within sight of us. It didn't sound like a dog, though, and we may as well know what it is. Step to the door, Mart Simpson, and look out."

The man who was addressed did not move.

"Why don't you open the door, Mart?"

"I ain't ashamed to tell you, cap'n, that I'm kinder scared."

"Scared! What on earth are you afraid of?"

"It didn't sound like a dog, as you said. The scratchin' was too high up, and the moanin' was onairthly. It ain't a dog, and it cain't be a man. I've a notion that it's a ghost."

"You miserable fool! There ain't any ghosts. If it was a ghost, it couldn't hurt you. Open the door!"

"Thar it is ag'in!" replied the man, as he drew back with a shudder.

Paul Roder jumped up with a savage oath, stepped to the door, and threw it wide open. As he did so, he turned deathly pale, and staggered back into the middle of the room.

The door was opposite to the wide fireplace, in which a fire of logs was blazing, illuminating the interior of the cabin. As the door was opened, the light fell upon a strange and terrible figure standing in the doorway—a tall and athletic man, coarsely clad, pale and bloody. His head was covered with long black hair, except at the crown, where it was raw and bleeding. There were streaks of blood on his face, and patches of blood on his hands, with one of which he pointed at his head, and the other he extended through the doorway, uttering a low moaning cry.

"Ben Blood!" exclaimed Roder, in a hoarse whisper, as he staggered back.

"His ghost!" replied Mart Simpson, in the same tone.

The others stood aghast and silent, some covering their faces with their hands, and others staring, as if fascinated, at the fearful sight.

"I've come for my scalp!" said the figure, still reaching its hand through the doorway.

"Give it to him," whispered St. Clair; but nobody stirred.

"I want my scalp," repeated the figure. "My head is cold."

The men shuddered, and were silent. At last Roder, who was nearest the door, summoned up courage to give the door a push, which closed it against the figure, and Mart Simpson instantly barred it.

It was some moments before any one spoke. All were

thoroughly frightened, and looked anxiously at the door dreading the reappearance of the specter, or some new and more fearful development. But it was not seen or heard again, and they began to speak to each other, at first in whispers, and more loudly as their courage came back to them.

"I never saw a ghost afore," said Paul Roder, "and I never believed in ghosts; but I can swear on a stack of Bibles that I've seen one this night."

"I knew suthin' was gwine to happen," said Mart Simpson. "I hev been feelin' that way sence last night. I was sure that no dog could make that noise, nor any livin' mortal."

"It was Ben Blood's ghost," said St. Clair. "I have had my doubts whether that man might not be living; but now I know that he is dead."

A cry was heard outside, and all jumped to their feet again, but they recovered their equanimity when it was repeated and recognized as the hail of the sentry.

In a few minutes the door opened, and Nat Whetstone walked in. The appearance of this man was a great relief to his agitated companions, and he was joyfully greeted.

"We have had a time of it to-night," said Roder.

"What was the matter?" asked Whetstone.

"Did you see anybody, or any thing, as you came along?"

"Nobody but Jim Baker."

"Had he seen any thing?"

"If he had, he didn't mention it to me."

"Reckon he didn't see it. If he had, it would have scared him as bad as any of the rest of us, and he wouldn't have failed to speak of it."

"What have you seen?"

"A ghost."

"A ghost! You are making fun of me."

"There's no joke about the matter. We are all ready to take our Bible oaths that we saw it. Do you remember what we told you last night, about that chap who went back on us?"

"Yes: I remember it very well."

"It was his ghost—Ben Blood's ghost."

"Did you speak to him?"

"No; but he spoke to us."

"What did he want?"

"His sculp. He stood in the doorway there, with the top of his head all raw and bleeding, and held out his hand to us, and told us to give him his sculp."

"Did you give it to him?"

"Not we. We were too bad scared for that."

"I told you to give it to him, captain," remarked St. Clair; "but none of you moved."

"Neither did you move. Why didn't you give it to him yourself? You were as bad scared as any of us, I reckon. I was the only man who had sense enough to shut the door."

"It's a pity you hadn't given him his sculp," remarked Whetstone, "when he came and asked for it so politely. Very likely he would have gone away, when you had given it to him, and would never have troubled you any more. Don't you know why it is these ghosts show themselves? It's always something missing that they are after, something that ought to be settled, and they can't rest easy in their graves until they get what they want. If they get it, they go away; if they don't get it, they keep coming."

"I wish to thunder that Fancy Charley there had given him his sculp. It's bad luck for him to be botherin' about here, and I don't like the looks of him, anyhow. If I only knew where he is buried, I would go and put the rotted old sculp in his grave."

"Is it at all likely that he is buried anywhere? You left him to die, and he could not have buried himself. If you want to find his grave, you had better ask the buzzards."

"How in thunder, if the buzzards took him, did he get himself pieced together, and come here to bother us to-night?"

"That is more than I can tell you. How did he get his clothes? They ought to have rotted before this time, and the blood on his head ought to have dried. There's no accounting for ghosts, I tell you. But one thing seems to be certain—if you saw the man's ghost, the man must surely be dead."

"Yes, he is dead—no doubt about that."

"And that's lucky for you. If his ghost can give you so much trouble, what would the man do, if he was living?"

"I own that I'm scary about ghosts; but Paul Roder was never afraid of any living man."

"We will gain nothing by talking about it. If the ghost shows himself when I am here, I will take his scalp down from the wall and give it to him."

"I believe you would do it, Whetstone. But he won't be here again to-night, and we must break up. We have a job to do before morning; but we won't ask you, as you are a new member, and the party is all made up."

The next morning there was great excitement among both the parties that were struggling for the ascendancy in and about March's Settlement. The law and order men were astonished, enraged and dismayed by the fact that Colonel Landry's house had been attacked, while he and George Warner were absent at Ferguson's ranch, and his daughter Rose had been forcibly carried away. There was no doubt that Roder's gang were answerable for the outrage, although the assailants, who numbered ten men, were all masked. They had easily overpowered the few servants of the house, and had quietly retired with Rose, without doing any special damage to the premises.

Roder's gang were surprised, infuriated and almost terrified by the fact that one of their number had been found dead at the roadside, a short distance from the settlement. An arrow had gone through his body, his scalp was missing, and one of his eyes had been scooped out. On his breast was pinned a paper, with these words written in large letters:

"An eye for an eye, and a scalp for a scalp"

No one could hazard even a guess at the perpetrator of this deed, except Roder and his friends, who at once decided among themselves that it was the work of the ghost.

CHAPTER VI.

A CHALLENGE ACCEPTED.

NAT WHETSTONE was made acquainted with the exciting topics of the morning, as soon as he entered March's Settlement. He went direct to St. Clair's "saloon," where he found many people who were full of information upon both subjects, and who were willing to dispense it without money and without price.

Without noticing these retailers of gossip, he directed his steps to the head-quarters of news, and was soon seated in a corner, holding a quiet confab with Paul Roder and Charles St. Clair.

These two were full of the topic that most nearly concerned themselves, and speedily told all they knew of the man who had been so mysteriously murdered. At the same time there was some suspicion in their tone and manner, and Whetstone thought that he could guess what troubled them.

"You noticed that I was late at your meeting last night," he said; "but none of you asked me why I was so late."

"We knew the reason," replied Roder. "That is, we were not sure then; but we know all about it now."

"You know that I was at Ferguson's ranch, with the vigilance men."

"Yes. I was waiting to hear what you had to say about it."

"Nothing in particular. As you know that I was there, it is likely that you know all I could tell you."

"Reckon we do; but I didn't know that we had two men watching them."

"Who was the other?"

"Perhaps you can guess."

"Perhaps I can. His name is Lawrence Satterlee."

"You *are* smart, Whetstone, by thunder! I wouldn't have thought that any man could have guessed it. Do you suppose that any of the vigilance men suspected him?"

"If they had I think I would have heard of it. But it can't be long before they do suspect him. I don't think he plays his part well. You had better take him off the trail, and let me attend to that business."

"We will do it, Whetstone. You are a smart chap, and I am glad we have got hold of you. How did you happen to go there?"

"I told you that I wanted to make money easy. I want to make it quick, and I want a heap of it. When I went into this business, I meant to pay attention to it. You will find me always on hand, captain, ready for work that will pay well."

"You're the right sort, sure. What do you think about that killing affair?"

"What do *you* think about it?"

"We think it is the work of the ghost—Ben Blood's ghost."

"I never before heard of ghosts hurting anybody? How can they, when they are dead, when there's nothing of them but air?"

"But this ghost hurt somebody. Who else could have done it? Who else would have done it in that way? There's nobody about here to take Ben Blood's part, except his ghost, and we know that we saw the ghost last night."

"I suppose you must be right about it, though I don't believe very strongly in ghosts. If he means to continue the business, it will be a bad look-out for you."

"I don't like it, Whetstone. I was never afraid of any living man; but I don't know how to fight a ghost."

"What has been done with the body?"

"Nothing. We are going out to bury it."

"I will go with you."

The three men went to the spot where the body had been found, and saw it lying by the roadside, as it had been discovered. The excitement concerning the killing was nearly over already, and the dead man would soon be forgotten by all except his special friends, one of whom was watching the corpse. In a country where human life was little valued, where the shedding of blood was of frequent occurrence, such an affair was of comparatively little consequence.

Roder and his friends inspected the body closely, and read the paper that was still pinned upon its breast, and then Whetstone pulled out the arrow that had given the man his death-warrant. He wiped off the blood, examined it carefully, and handed it to Roder.

"That is a Comanche arrow, captain."

"A Comanche arrow! How do you know that? How can you tell a Comanche arrow from any other arrow?"

"By the make of it. I have been among the Comanches and I know their arrows."

"But there are no Comanches within two hundred miles of here."

"Very likely; but that is a Comanche arrow."

"That beats me worse than any thing that has happened yet. How could a ghost get hold of a Comanche arrow?"

"I don't know any thing about ghosts; but I suppose they can do any thing they want to do. This one means to give you trouble, I am afraid. What a pity you hadn't given him his scalp when he asked for it!"

"I wish we had. I will take the arrow to Jim Baker, and ask him what he thinks about it. He has been among the Comanches. Let us bury the poor fellow."

That work was soon finished, and the men returned to the settlement. After a little further conversation with his friends, Whetstone left them, and went to Colonel Landry's.

He found the household in great trouble and confusion. Colonel Landry himself was in such a condition that he was incapable of giving any directions. At one time he was furious, at another despondent. He declared that Roder's gang had committed the outrage, that the men were known, and that they must instantly be pursued and punished. The next moment he bewailed his folly in connecting himself with the vigilance committee and in stopping his payment to Roder, vowing that his friends had ruined him, that he would never see his child again. His friends excused his utterances, as he was growing old, and was entirely wrapped up in Rose. His wife was plunged in grief, and her condition was fully as pitiable as that of her husband.

George Warner was there, with several of the members of the vigilance committee. After vainly endeavoring to

console Mrs. Landry and to induce the colonel to listen to reason, they had left the old people to their own devices, and had set at work to consult seriously concerning what should be done in the matter. The servants had been examined, but nothing definite had been elicited from them. There could be no doubt that the outrage had been perpetrated by members of Roder's gang; but there was nothing to identify the men.

All were of the opinion that the abduction of Rose Landry had been intended as an act of defiance, as a declaration of war against the vigilance committee. The time had come for a struggle, said George Warner, for a struggle that could no longer be deferred. If they should refuse to accept this challenge, they would soon be bound hand and foot, at the mercy of the lawless ruffians who had so long controlled that portion of Texas.

It was agreed, after a little hesitation, that the audacious challenge should be accepted, that Rose Landry should be recovered at all hazards, and that the vigilants should exterminate Roder's gang, or lose their lives in the attempt. Warner brought pens, ink and paper, and proceeded to draw up a notice, to be posted in March's Settlement that night.

It was while this document was being composed, that Nat Whetstone arrived at the house. He sympathized very warmly with Colonel Landry and his wife, and approved of the resolution which the gentlemen present had taken; but advised that they should move cautiously, not risking too much until their organization should be completed.

"The notice," he said, "may do the work. If it does not, you must proceed with great secrecy and with a large force; for you do not know the strength of these people."

"Do you know it, sir?" asked one of the committee.

"I believe it is greater than you suppose it to be. But you need not be in a hurry to take any further measures. Perhaps the notice will do the work."

With this he withdrew, followed by suspicious looks; but suspicion did not as yet find vent in words.

Early in the night of the same day two strange characters might have been seen, if any one had been there to see them, near Colonel Landry's house. Perhaps they might not have been seen, except by a very sharp-sighted person; for they

evidently tried to avoid observation, and as evidently were well able to do so.

Paul Roder had said that there were no Comanches within two hundred miles of March's Settlement; but these were Indians, and to what other tribe did they belong?

One was short, and inclined to be bow-legged; but he had a high forehead, good features, and a commanding expression of countenance, as well as the head-dress of a chief. The other was taller and more athletic, with the appearance of a white man, rather than that of an Indian. He was only partially attired in Indian costume, and his head was covered with a slouched hat, from beneath which long, black hair flowed down upon his shoulders. As he raised his bare right arm, the moonlight fell upon it, showing a skin swarthy, but not red, marked with a long black arrow, the point toward his hand.

Although these two avoided observation, and kept a sharp look-out to make sure that they were not noticed, they walked with their eyes bent upon the ground most of the time, and were undoubtedly looking for something.

"I have found it," said the tall man at last.

"Are my brother's eyes so good?"

"No better than yours, Ne-cum-wa. It does not need very good eyes to see such a plain trail in the moonlight. We have just come upon it. See—it is easy enough to follow it."

"Let Black Arrow take up the trail, and Ne-cum-wa will look to see whether we are watched."

The tall man followed the trail swiftly, with his companion close at his heels. He was evidently used to trailing, and this was a broad and new trail, easily visible in the moonlight. It led him to the north-east of the few buildings that composed March's Settlement, through a piece of heavy timber, then across a strip of prairie, to a wooded arroyo, dry at that time, but a considerable water-course during the wet season.

At a warning whistle from Ne-cum-wa, both sunk down into the grass, silent and motionless.

"Look!" whispered Ne-cum-wa, pointing at a man who was walking rapidly across the prairie, not a hundred yards from where they lay. Both watched the man until he disappeared in the arroyo, and then rose and followed him.

"It is just as I thought," said Black Arrow. "I know that man. I know the spot to which he is going, and the purpose for which he goes."

He quickened his steps, and Ne-cum-wa followed him as rapidly. They descended to the bottom of the arroyo, which was about twenty feet deep, and stopped where a large log was lying against the bank, as it had fallen from above.

"Does my brother see?" asked Black Arrow, as he pointed at the log. "Let Ne-cum-wa wait and watch. Black Arrow will return before the moon is down."

Ne-cum-wa nodded, and concealed himself in the arroyo, while his companion walked swiftly away.

CHAPTER VII.

BLACK ARROWS.

At the same hour at which Black Arrow and Ne-cum-wa took up the trail from Colonel Landry's house, Paul Roder's men were again assembling at the little cabin in the wood. The object of this meeting was to make arrangements to attack a train of traders and emigrants that was expected from the East. These banditti of the frontier, mostly fugitives from the law, had adopted the predatory habits of the red-men, and had as keen a scent for plunder as buzzards have for carrion. There were two difficulties in dealing with them, one arising from the unsettled condition of the country and the powerlessness of the officers of justice; the other arising from the fact that their real strength could not be definitely ascertained, as each party had its ramifications through the country, and the lawless of one section were always ready to assist the lawless in another, while those who favored law and order had scarcely any combination or concert of action.

Roder had received timely information of the expected train, and he assured his associates that it would be the most valuable prize that had yet come within their reach.

St. Clair was not present when this scheme was developed, and Whetstone was a late arrival.

"What has become of the sentinel?" inquired the latter, when he entered the cabin. "No one hailed me as I came in sight of the shanty."

"Mart Simpson is on guard," replied Roder. "He is a careless hand; but he is somewhere about. He knew you, I reckon, and thought it wasn't worth while to hail you. That ain't the right way to do business, anyhow, and Mart must have a blowing up about it. What made you so late this time, Whetstone? Have you been with the vigilance folks ag'in?"

"Not to-night, captain; but I saw something of them this morning. You have made them mad this time, and you will know what they mean to do before you are many hours older."

"What is it, now? They had better leave us alone."

"They mean to give you notice that Landry's girl must be brought back, or you may expect war to the death."

"Just what we want. They will find out who is boss. We are too many for them, whether they know it or not."

"Very well. You know more about that than I do. Have you seen the ghost to-night?"

"Not yet," replied Roder, with a perceptible shudder. "I am glad you have come, as you promised to give him his sculp if he should call for it again."

"I will give it to him when he comes, and you may be sure that that will be the last of him. What business is on hand to-night?"

Roder proceeded to explain the plan that had been formed, and Whetstone expressed the liveliest satisfaction at the prospect of "making money easy." The explanations were hardly finished, when St. Clair entered the cabin, a little the worse for liquor, but with a pleased and triumphant air.

"Nobody on guard to-night?" asked the new-comer.

"Yes," replied Roder. "Mart Simpson is the man."

"Pretty watch he keeps. He don't make himself seen or heard."

"Just what Whetstone said. I wonder if any thing is the matter with him. I'm keen to swear, by thunder! that he's lyin' out thar drunk. Let's go and look for him."

Torches were lighted, and the whole company went out into the timber to look for their missing comrade.

"Just as I thought!" exclaimed Roder, as he tumbled over the negligent sentry. "Here he is, drunk and asleep."

But kicks and curses did not awaken the sleeper, and more lights were brought to the spot.

"Dead, by thunder!"

"Sculped!"

"An arrow through him!"

"See this yere paper!"

The man was dead, no doubt, lying in a pool of his own blood, an arrow in his body, his scalp missing, one of his eyes scooped out, and a paper pinned to his breast, with these words upon it:

"An eye for an eye, and a scalp for a scalp."

"The ghost ag'in!" exclaimed Roder.

"No doubt about it this time," remarked St. Clair, who was now thoroughly sober.

"Never was any. That ghost will be the death of us all yet."

"What a pity you hadn't given him his scalp!"

"What a pity *you* hadn't given it to him, instead of talking about it so much."

"Suppose the ghost had got his scalp," suggested Whetstone, with a strange smile. "Then he might have come back for his eye."

"That's so, by thunder! and we haven't got the eye to give him. Let us scratch a hole, boys, and bury this man. I can't bear to look at him."

A hole was made, and the body of Mart Simpson was interred; not before Whetstone had extracted the arrow.

"A Comanche arrow," he said, as he wiped it and handed it to Paul Roder.

No more "business" was transacted at that meeting. A gloom hung over all who were present. It was an unusual gloom with all except Nat Whetstone, who was seldom otherwise than gloomy. They were appalled in view of the awful and mysterious fate of two of their number, a fate that might at any moment befall any of them—any of them, at least, who had been concerned in the punishment of Ben Blood; the others had a faint hope that they might be out of the scrape.

Little was said among them before they separated, going their respective ways in groups or pairs.

Whetstone accompanied Charles St. Clair, and soon commenced a conversation with him.

"For my part," said he, "I don't think I am afraid of the ghost, as I had nothing to do with killing that fellow, or with taking his scalp or his eye. Did you have a hand in the matter?"

"No. I had a say-so about it; but the others did the work. I followed him to Landry's."

"You informed against him, then. I am sorry to hear it, as I had taken a liking to you, and I am afraid the ghost may give you trouble. It would be a pity if any thing should happen to you now, just when you have got what you have been so long wishing for."

"What is that? What are you speaking of?"

"Rose Landry, of course."

"How do you know that I have got her?"

"Guessed it. Don't you know that I am good at guessing? Didn't Captain Roder tell you what I guessed about Lawrence Satterlee? It was easy enough to guess that you have Rose Landry. Where have you put her?"

"That would be telling. You may be sure that she is safe, and I would defy the devil himself to find her. She is in a place that no living man knows any thing about, except Roder and me."

"No *living* man?"

"No other man ever knew it, but one, and he is dead."

"Who was he?"

"Ben Blood."

"Perhaps, Charley, his ghost may remember the place."

"Curse you! Why did you speak of that? There—don't get riled, Whetstone. It turns my quills all up to think about that infernal ghost. Very likely you are right. I will take her away from there in the morning."

"I hope you may find her safe, and that the ghost may leave you to the last, if he can't do any better by you. Good-night!"

St. Clair hastened away, loosening his pistol in his belt, and looking anxiously around him as he went. The last words uttered by Whetstone had left an unpleasant impression upon him, and he was nervous and uneasy. Two of the men who

were concerned in the Ben Blood affair had been, as Roder said, "rubbed out" some time previously. Two men had lately met their doom, in a terrible and mysterious way. There were but five left, including himself. Could it be possible, as Whetstone had suggested, that the revengeful ghost intended to take them off one by one, leaving him to the last? The thought chilled his blood, and he mentally resolved that if another should be taken, he would fly the country.

Paul Roder and Jim Baker walked together; but they had not far to go, as they soon stopped at the cabin occupied by the latter.

Here they raked out the embers in the rude fire-place, piled on some wood, and soon had a brisk fire blazing. By the aid of the fire, and of the contents of a black bottle which Baker produced, they soon heated their blood, and were enabled to talk quite boldly of the recent terrifying events.

"Let me look at that arrer, cap'n," said Baker, after the death of Simpson had been duly discussed.

Roder handed to his companion the arrow that had been drawn from Simpson's body, and Baker, after wiping it, examined it closely.

"It's a Comanche arrer," he said, "jest as that fellow told ye—jest as t'other one was."

"He knew all about it, then."

"Yaas, and I'd like to be sartin how he knows so much."

"He had been among the Comanches, he said."

"Like enough; but I've seen folks afore now who knowed too much, and it may turn out this chap is one of 'em. Thar's another suthin about this arrer, cap'n."

"What's that?"

"The color of it. It's a black arrer. T'other one was a black arrer too."

"Is there any thing strange in that?"

"Yaas. 'Tain't often you see an arrer painted that way, or any other way. Thar's a chief among the southern Comanches who goes by the name of Black Arrer."

"You seem to know more about the matter than Whetstone knew, and yet you hint that he knows more than he ought to. You don't suppose that that Comanche chief has come down here to kill our men?"

"I don't suppose nothin'. Here's two black arrers. Suthin sing'lar 'bout that. Thar's a Comanche chief named Black Arrer. Put this and that together. I never see'd Black Arrer; but I've heerd that his blood ain't all red. Add this to t'other, and w'at's the amount?"

"Well, what is it?"

"That's for you to say. I ain't good at countin'. I only give the figgers."

Paul Roder leaned his head upon his hand a few minutes and gazed at the fire with a troubled and perplexed expression. Then he looked up suddenly at his companion.

"Don't talk nonsense to me, Jim Baker," he said. "You mountain-men are always full of your out-of-the-way notions, and some people believe in them just because they are sc queer and unlikely. It's quite out of reason that any Comanche should be down this way, whether a half-breed or a full-blooded red. It's a great deal stranger that our men should have been shot with arrows, than that the arrows should be black. I don't make any thing of that."

"Let it be, then."

"It's one thing or t'other. Either Ben Blood's ghost is after us, or we didn't kill him as dead as we thought we did."

"P'raps we didn't."

"You may have heard tell of men who have lived after their hair has been raised. You mountain-men have plenty of such yarns. I never saw such a man, and I don't believe you ever did. That chap was hardly living when we left him, and the breath couldn't have stayed in him an hour longer."

"Did ye never hear of John Glass and the b'ar?"

"Yes; I have heard that yarn."

"Glass was dead, torn all to giblets, with his sculp down over his face—so chawed up that he wasn't wuth buyin'; but he turned up livin' at last."

"That may be true, though I don't bet high on such yarns. Do you mean to say that Ben Blood has come to life, and has had a hand in this killin'? Of course you don't. His ghost is about here, we know. If you had seen this ghost, as the rest of us saw it, you would know what the matter is."

"Whar did you pick up that Whetstone chap?"

"What! You ain't going to say that *he* has been killing our men?"

"I never afore saw you fly off the handle so easily, cap'n. Did I say any thin' ag'in' him? Think ye mought answer a civil questic'n."

"We came across him—Charley and I—and we took a notion to him."

"Don't he sorter 'mind you of Ben Blood?"

"A little—yes. Has a new notion struck you now, Jim Baker? This man carries his sculp on the top of his head."

"I've noticed that, partic'lar. If I hadn't, I don't know what I mought hev thought. Are ye sure he is all right?"

"I don't pretend to be dead sure of any man. He had better not deceive us. He knows the penalty."

"Here's one as don't like to trust any man too fur on short acquaintance."

"You are right about that, Jim, and I don't know but I am trusting this man a little too far. I will put Satterlee to watch him for a while."

CHAPTER VIII.

BIND AND FIND.

WE are not yet done with the events of the night that witnessed the death of Mart Simpson. Before finishing the narration, we must go back to the capture of Rose Landry.

That young lady, if she could have been examined by members of the vigilance committee, or even by George Warner, would not have been able to give a more definite account of the occurrence than was obtained from her mother or the servants.

She only knew that the house was entered, quickly and quietly, by a number of masked men; that the masked men were completely under the control of their leader, who seemed to know all the ins and outs of the building; that all the

inmates were at once seized, and compelled, by threats or by gags, to keep quiet; that she herself was gagged, and was partly led, partly carried, away from her home.

She was blindfolded and placed upon a horse, which was led away slowly. She did not know in what direction she was taken, or how far she went; but the journey seemed a long one, as it was painful and tedious.

At last the horse was stopped, and she was taken down and compelled to walk. There was then but one man with her, she behind, and he held her arm. She knew that she descended into a ravine, where the man was obliged to hold her tightly to prevent her from falling. After a little while she was thrust through an opening in the earth, she supposed, and fell forward on the damp ground. She was not much hurt by the fall; but her situation was so dreadful, that her senses gave way, and she fainted where she fell.

When she came to herself, the bandage had been removed from her eyes, and she was seated on a pile of blankets. She looked around, and found herself in a small and low apartment, that looked as if it had been dug out of the ground. The walls were damp and gloomy; but in one corner a little fire was blazing, recently kindled, which might in time have the effect of dispelling the damp, though its smoke was at that moment far from pleasant.

The man who had kindled the fire stood near it, gazing at it, and occasionally looking at Rose. He was the only person, besides herself, in the apartment, and she shuddered as she looked at him. She had seen him frequently, and she knew his name—he was called Charles St. Clair; but he had only once had the audacity to speak to Colonel Landry's daughter. On that occasion—it was plain that he had been drinking too much—he had uttered some threats which she had then disregarded, but which now caused her to tremble with fright as they came back to her memory.

"You know me, I see," said St. Clair, as he noticed her look. "You will know me better, I reckon, before you are through with me. But don't be scared, lady-bird, I'm neither a bear nor a painter. I won't eat you, and I won't hurt you in any way, if you will behave yourself and be docile."

"What do you want? What have you brought me here

for?" asked Rose, as soon as she could overcome the choking sensation in her throat.

"What a question! As if you don't know! Have you forgotten what I said to you once? You didn't take much notice of me then; but I reckon you remember. You are Colonel Landry's daughter, and that's why you are here. Some of us have got a grudge against the old man; but that ain't all. I want to come in for his money—d'ye see?—and I love you, Rose. That's the long and the short of it."

"If you really love me," entreated Rose, "take me home to my parents. I will thank you and bless you as long as I live, and I am sure that you will be well rewarded."

"Come, now; that is asking too much. You can't think that I would take all this trouble for nothing. You may bet your pile that I do love you, lady-bird, and I mean to prove it by making you my wife. Then you may bless me all your life, and I will make sure of being well rewarded some time."

Rose groaned, and covered her face with her hands.

"This isn't what you might call a right comfortable place," continued St. Clair; "but I don't mean that you shall stay here many days. The fire will take the chill off, though it may seem a little smoky at first, and there are plenty of blankets and such like to make you comfortable. I must leave you for a while, though I am afraid that you will be scared while I am gone."

"No, no! I shall do very well. For God's sake leave me."

"I'll do it; but you needn't be very glad; for you're not going to get out of here while I am gone. I shall leave a man here—a friend of mine—who will feed you and take care of you. I hope you will have pleasant dreams, especially if you dream of me."

St. Clair disappeared through the opening, and Rose found herself alone. As soon as she could regain her composure, she set herself to examine her prison. It was, as has been said, a small and low apartment, damp and gloomy. The fire—the smoke of which found some invisible outlet—made it comfortable, and gave sufficient light for her investigation. There were several boxes and barrels scattered about, some of

them empty, and others quite heavy. There were also some tin dishes, cooking utensils, and a variety of miscellaneous articles, including a number of blankets and skins. Her couch was composed of plank laid on the ground covered with blankets.

Having observed thus much, she went to the entrance, determined, if there should be a chance for escape in that direction, to avail herself of it at once. She found it narrow, sloping upward, and so dark that she could see nothing. She could only trust to her sense of touch, which soon showed her that she was helpless. The opening was closed by some obstruction, so heavy or so well fastened that her utmost efforts could not stir it.

Having exhausted herself in vain, she laid down upon her bed of blankets, to rest and to think. As far as she could see, if she could escape in any way, it must be by digging. She judged that her prison was in the side of a hill, and that it would be possible, if she had the time and the tools, to open a tunnel to the air. At all events, there could be no harm in making the attempt, and she began to search for something to dig with.

She found a broken case-knife, which she thought would be useful, and took it to the fire to examine it. As she did so, she perceived something shining on the ground, and picked it up. It was a knife, bright and sharp, with a long blade and a buck-horn handle, of that pattern which has done more to make the name of Bowie famous, than his gallant death at the Alamo. It had doubtless been dropped by St. Clair.

As Rose looked at this weapon, she thought that it might be used for her defense, as well as to aid her escape. She did not pretend to be very heroic; but she believed that desperation might inspire her with courage to use it, and she hoped that God would give her strength in time of need.

The knife was a comfort to her. It was a Godsend, it was a companion, it seemed to give her strength. She concealed it among the blankets of her couch, and laid down, believing that she could rest better with the weapon by her side.

She did sleep, after an hour or so of wakefulness, and her slumbers were not broken until morning, when she was

aroused by the descent of some person through the entrance to her prison.

Charles St. Clair, although he had boasted to Whetstone that only two men besides himself had ever known of his hiding-place, had been obliged to confide it to another person ; but this person was one in whom he could trust implicitly.

This was the man who entered Rose's prison-house, bringing some food and some fuel to replenish the fire. Rose was glad that it was not St. Clair, and tried tears and entreaties to induce him to take her home or suffer her to escape. But the man was sullen, obdurate and silent, having probably received his instructions from St. Clair. Her prayers and tears produced no more impression upon him than a shower would produce upon a rock, and he went, as he had come, without a word.

When he had gone, Rose ate a portion of the food that had been brought, and at once set at work resolutely to dig her way out. She naturally commenced on the same side where there was already an opening, and labored vigorously, with the knife and with her hands, carefully taking up the earth as she dug it out, and putting it in one of the empty boxes, where she covered it with a blanket. It was slow work ; but she had made, by the time she was completely tired out, a hole in which she could hide herself. When she laid down to rest, she drew a box against the hole, and covered it with a blanket. She was continually troubled, while she was at work, by the fear that St. Clair or the other man might come upon her unawares and discover what she was doing ; but she was not disturbed until night, when St. Clair came, bringing her food and drink. He looked suspiciously at her as she reclined on her couch, then drew a box to her side, placed upon it what he had brought, and invited her to eat.

While she was eating, he busied himself with making the fire burn more briskly, and examined the ground by its light.

" I lost a knife last night," he said, " and thought I might have dropped it in here. Have you seen it ?"

Rose did not answer.

" She looks queer," he muttered. " Three to one she has got it."

" It's no matter," he said, coming toward her. " A knife more or less don't count, while I have something worth more

than a whole world full of knives. You are mine now, lady-bird. Come to me!"

As he advanced with outstretched arms, Rose Landry believed that the time had come to try her courage and her weapon. She started up, drew the bowie-knife, and flashed the bright blade before his eyes.

"Stand back!" she exclaimed. "Don't come a step nearer, or I will drive this knife into your heart!"

St. Clair let his hands fall at his sides, and burst into a roar of laughter.

"Mighty good tragedy airs!" he said, mockingly. "Never saw them beat at Orleans. It's a pity to show them for nothing. I guessed that you had my knife, lady-bird, and thought I could make you show it. Will you give it to me, or will you make me take it away from you?"

Rose still brandished the bowie threateningly, and bade him advance at his peril.

With a mocking smile St. Clair slowly advanced, keeping his eyes fastened upon hers. Rose struck at him viciously when he came within reach; but he easily avoided the blow, and the next instant he seized her hand, and wrenched the knife from her grasp. She sunk upon her couch, and burst into tears of grief over this new defeat.

"Thank you, lady-bird!" said St. Clair. "Hope I haven't hurt you. I can't allow children to meddle with edged tools. Let me see what you have been doing with the knife. Ha! there is dirt on the blade and on the handle. Three to one you have been digging with it. This must be looked into."

He rummaged about the room, and soon found the hole that Rose had dug and carefully concealed. He pulled away the blanket, and laughed as he looked at it.

"I reckon it's no laughing matter to you, lady-bird," he said. "It is a pity that those sweet white hands should have been working so hard in that rough dirt, and all for nothing. Perhaps a man might dig his way out of there in a week; but it would be a poor paying business for you, lady-bird."

Rose made no reply, and St. Clair soon went away, after explaining that he had but a few minutes to stop, as he was very busy; but that he would soon take her to Galveston, where he would be with her all the time.

Though not at all consoled by this intelligence, Rose was thankful to him for taking himself away. She was so overcome by this last stroke, that she was ready to despair. She had been so easily disarmed of her only weapon, and St. Clair's mocking words had convinced her that it was hopeless to attempt to escape. There was now but one resource. She knelt down, and prayed earnestly. After she had wrapped herself in the blankets, she continued to whisper her supplications, until, while she was yet praying, she fell asleep.

She could not have told how long she had slept, when she was awakened by a noise at the entrance. She started to a half-sitting posture, but drew back against the wall in affright, as she saw a dark figure descend into the apartment. The figure moved to the fire, fanned the scanty embers, and added more fuel, and soon a bright blaze illuminated the room. As the light flashed up she saw that the figure was that of an Indian, with blanket, feathers, war-paint, and all the paraphernalia of the savage.

At the sight of this fearful object, she uttered a scream, and buried her face in her couch.

"Let my sister not be afraid," said the Indian, speaking in good English, and in soft and mellow tones. "Her brother is not come to hurt her, but to save her."

There was something in the voice that touched Rose deeply, something that told her she could trust the speaker. She looked up, smilingly and gratefully, as if she knew that a friend was before her.

"Can this be true?" she exclaimed. "Has God sent you in answer to my prayer? Will you take me home?"

"You shall go to your father's house. Let my sister arise, that I may wrap a blanket around her, as the night is cool."

"But there is a man about here, who was left to watch me."

"He will never watch any more."

A blanket was wrapped around Rose, who placed her hand confidently in that of the savage, and suffered herself to be led to the entrance. A few words, in a tongue unknown to her, passed between her conductor and a person on the outside: a large log was rolled away, and she saw the vault of heaven above her, studded with stars. In a few moments she had stepped out into the air, and was free of her prison-house.

Her conductor was joined by another Indian, and she was led away between them. She had gone but a few steps, when she nearly stumbled over the body of a man, and she shuddered as she saw blood on his face.

"Ne-cum-wa was careless," said her Indian guide. "Watch-dogs must be silenced; but we need not run over them."

When they had ascended to the prairie, Rose was placed on a horse, and rode away at a rapid walk, the Indians keeping at her side and directing her course.

Just as day was breaking, she found herself in sight of her father's house, and she did not try to repress the cry of joy and thankfulness that rose to her lips. The Indians stopped, and signified that they could go no further.

"My sister is safe," said the warrior who had come to her in her prison. "Her brothers must now leave her."

"Do not leave me yet!" implored Rose. "I have not yet thanked you for this great service. Come with me to the house, and let my father and mother thank you."

"Let them thank the Great Spirit. We can not enter the lodge."

"At least, then, tell me your name, that we may know for whom we shall pray."

The warrior hesitated a moment, then bared his right arm, and held it up before her. Rose saw upon the swarthy skin the mark of a long black arrow, the point toward the hand.

In a moment the two Indians were out of sight, and Rose joyfully galloped home.

CHAPTER IX.

ANOTHER MARKED!

THERE had been great excitement in March's Settlement and in the adjoining country since the vigilance committee was first talked of. Although that body had not as yet made any movement, it was generally believed that as soon as the vigilants could complete their organization, and make sure that

their strength was sufficient for the occasion, they would strike a decisive blow. This being the case, it was natural that the people in the neighborhood should be interested in the matter, and that they should begin to take sides.

The mysterious death of Roder's men had caused some comment, and a great deal more would have arisen, if it had been known that a similar fate had befallen Mart Simpson; but that occurrence had been kept a profound secret by his friends, who accounted for his absence by saying that he was away on business.

The excitement may be said to have culminated the morning after the events narrated in the last chapter, when two written notices were found posted up in the settlement, one on a large tree that was generally used for posting notices, and the other on the door of St. Clair's "saloon."

These notices were addressed to Roder's gang and all other disorderly persons in March's Settlement and the adjoining country. They stated that the authors of the outrage at Colonel Landry's house were well known, and that, if they would escape punishment, the young lady must be returned to her relatives within two days. If the notice should not be heeded, Roder's gang would be declared outlaws, and immediate measures would be taken for their extermination and for the suppression of all disorderly persons and establishments. The notices were signed, "By order of the vigilance committee."

A number of readers and listeners were attracted to these documents, those who were able to read taking pleasure in deciphering them for the benefit of those whose education was insufficient for the task. Many comments were made upon them, and there were more, in all probability, which it was not considered safe or prudent to utter.

In the group in front of the "saloon" were Paul Roder, Nat Whetstone and Jim Baker. They had read the notices, and were listening in silence to the remarks that were made concerning them.

"Why don't you pull it down, Roder?" asked a bystander.

"Why should I? I don't think it worth that much notice."

"I should hate to have my name stuck up in that way."

"Perhaps your name is there. How do you know but you

are one of the disorderly persons the note speaks about? I don't know who among us would be safe, if that paper was worth any thing. If any man or set of men has got a grudge against me or my friends, let 'em come out and say it to our faces. They won't find us afraid to meet 'em. Nobody but a coward would sneak about and stick up notices in the dark.

"The fact is," said Roder, when he had walked aside with his two friends, "those vigilance folks have overhot the mark. If they hadn't put into the notice that stuff about all disorderly persons and establishments, they might have bothered me a little; but they have done us a deal more good than harm."

"How so?" asked Whetstone.

"More than one man will be for us now, who would have been against us if they had put only Paul Roder and his friends in the notice. What man can say that he mayn't be picked up as one of the disorderly people? We will hold the best hand if they play the game that way, and I wouldn't have one of those notices touched for a pile."

"Perhaps you are right; but I don't understand you. You talk very strangely, after what has happened."

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't you know any thing about those notices until this morning?"

"I believe you said something about them last night."

"Oh, yes. I had forgotten that. I was just in time, it seems."

"I don't know what on earth you are talking about."

"I was just in time to give you a chance to fix it—to straighten it up before the notices came out."

"To fix what? To straighten up what?"

"The girl business. Do you want to make me think that you haven't sent her back?"

"Sent her back! You are crazy, Whetstone."

"My eyes may have lied to me; but I am sure that I saw her, just at dawn this morning, as I was coming to the settlement. She was on a sorrel horse, riding up to her father's house."

"Is this true?"

"True as gospel, unless my eyesight has lied to me. I saw

her plain enough, and that is what made me wonder at the way you spoke about the notices. People will say that you sent her back because the notices frightened you."

"The thun-der-ation! If there's no mistake about this, I am pretty badly hurt. Of course they would say that we were scared. I wouldn't have had such a thing happen for all I hope to get out of that train. Is it possible that Charley has turned her loose? It wouldn't be like him, and he can't have seen the notices, though there's a chance that he may have heard something of them last night."

"Perhaps she turned herself loose," suggested Whetstone.

"How did she get the horse, then? If she has really gone home, Charley must have turned her loose, and he will have it to answer for."

"I reckon you'll find him able to answer fur himself," grumbled Jim Baker. "Here he comes, as if a peraira fire was arter him, and you kin see that he's as wild as a norther."

In fact, it would not be easy to conceive of a more vivid picture of rage, disappointment and terror, than was presented by St. Clair as he came rushing into the settlement. Without stopping to speak to any of his acquaintances who greeted him, but roughly shoving aside every one who stood in his way, he hastened to where Roder and his two friends were standing.

"What is the matter, Charley?" asked Roder, as St. Clair was too breathless to speak. "You look as if you had been kicked out of a thunder-cloud. Whetstone has just been telling us some bad news."

"Not as bad as *I* have to tell, you may bet high."

"He says that he saw Landry's girl going home, this morning, just at dawn."

"He saw her! Was she alone?"

"Yes, and riding a sorrel horse."

"I would like to know how the ghost got hold of a sorrel horse."

"The ghost! What did the ghost have to do with it?"

"Every thing. I left Kirby Sparks on guard out there last night. At daylight I went to look after the girl, and there I saw Kirby lying on the ground, down in the arroyo, in front of the hole."

"Dead?"

"Dead as Davy Crockett! Just like the others. An arrow through his body, his scalp gone, an eye out, and one of those infernal papers pinned on his breast."

"Hush-sh! Not so loud, Charley! Somebody might hear you. Let us go out there."

"You may go; but I have had enough of it. I am going to leave this country."

"Don't be a fool, Charley."

"I am not going out there, and that's flat. I am going to the saloon, to take something to warm me up."

"Better cool down, if you can. Those folks will suspect that something is the matter, and then they will be sure to find out what it is."

Whetstone and Baker were willing to accompany Roder, and the three left the settlement, avoiding observation as well as they could, and hastened to the hole in the arroyo. There they found the body of Kirby Sparks, as St. Clair had described it.

It was some moments before either of the party spoke. Roder and Baker stood and gazed at the corpse, and Whetstone stood and gazed at them.

"Charley was right," said Roder at last. "This is some more of the work of that infernal ghost. No wonder Charley wanted to leave the country. I'm getting tired of this business. Whose turn will come next?"

"Was this man concerned in the Ben Blood affair?" asked Whetstone.

"Yes. There are four of us left now—Charley, and Lant Pirlle, and Jim Baker, and I."

"I am sorry for you four; but I can't help feeling glad that I am out of the scrape."

"It's a serious matter; but what is to be will be; though that's a death that this child don't like to think of. Let us dig a hole, boys. It is all we can do."

Before the body was laid in the shallow grave, Whetstone had extracted the arrow and wiped it.

"It is a Comanche arrow," he said, "like the others."

"Look at it ag'in," said Baker. "Thar's another fact about that arrer. It's a black arrer."

"Yes; it is a black arrow."

"When you was among the Comanches, did you ever see or hear of a chief named Black Arrer?"

"I have heard of him, and I have seen him."

"Was he full red?"

"I don't think he was."

"Didn't he allus use black arrers?"

"Don't think he did. If he had, I should have heard of it."

"P'raps you mought. That's all I wanted to know."

"It seems to me, Roder, that our friend Baker is not inclined to believe in the ghost."

"Because he didn't see it. He was out on guard that night. He has got some crazy notion into his head about a Comanche chief, as if any Comanche would come down here and pick us off in this style. I don't know but he half believes that Ben Blood has come to life."

"Jest you let me alone, cap'n," replied Baker, "and you may find out, some time, what my notion really is. I give you the figgers, and you wouldn't count 'em up. I mean to rub my head and take a count at 'em myself."

"If you had seen what the rest of us saw, you wouldn't have but one notion about it. But you may see the ghost yet before you get through with your countin'. It may be your turn next."

"Like enough," remarked Whetstone.

"Come, boys; grabble in the dirt, I want to get away from here, and think of something else."

The hole was filled, and the three men returned to the settlement, where they found as much excitement as they had left there. It became known that Rose Landry had returned to her father's house, and there was but one opinion concerning her return—that Roder and his men, frightened at the decisive tone adopted by the vigilance committee, had thought it advisable to give her up.

Roder had determined, while returning to the settlement, upon the course that he should pursue in this matter.

"It is one of the worst things that could have happened to us," he said; "but it can't be helped, and we must face it out as well as we can. It will be no joking matter between us

and the vigilance folks, 'specially with that infernal ghost, or whatever it is, picking off our men. We have held the best hand all along; but I am not so sure of the cards now, and we must look after the fellows on the fence. If those chaps get a notion that we are scared, they will go over to the vigilants like a flock of sheep, and then the jig is up with us."

"They will soon find out that the girl has gone home," said Whetstone. "I know what I thought about it, and they will be likely to think as I did."

"We must show that we are mad about it. That's not all. We must get her back, or make a bold stroke of some kind, to keep those fence chaps from jumping over on the other side. When a man begins to go down hill, every fool is ready to give him a kick. Not a word about Simpson's death, mind you, or this last affair. We've got to keep a stiff upper lip."

At the settlement Roder discovered that St. Clair had drank himself into such a state that he had lost control of his tongue, and it was necessary to quiet him and get him away before he should do damage. This accomplished, Roder had sufficient occupation for the rest of the day, in "keeping a stiff upper lip," and looking after "the fellows on the fence."

Whetstone soon left the settlement, and made his way to Colonel Landry's. He found the colonel and his family in a state of great wonderment and mystification, and he also perceived that Colonel Landry greeted him coldly, appearing to regard him with distrust and suspicion.

Rose had related the manner of her escape, and all were puzzled to guess who her rescuers might have been. Whetstone gave an account of the excitement that prevailed in the settlement, and strongly advised the policy of representing that Rose had been released and sent home by Roder's men. He represented that this course would tend to demoralize the lawless party, and to strengthen the hands of the vigilants.

Colonel Landry listened to this advice with strong symptoms of distrust, and George Warner soon beckoned his friend outside, as he wished to speak to him privately.

"Yes," said Whetstone, in reply to a remark of Warner's concerning Colonel Landry, "I see that he treats me very coolly; but I don't know how I can have offended him."

"He is suspicious of you."

"What does he suspect?"

"He suspects that you belong to Roder's gang."

"Well, and what if I do?"

"Is it possible that you are a traitor to us?"

"I hope I am not. Time will show. In the meanwhile I can only ask you to trust me, and I think that you will trust me, George Warner, whoever else may doubt me."

"I will. I don't know why it is; but I feel that I can trust you fully, although there are suspicious circumstances against you."

"Let them pass. Did you say that they were Indians who rescued Miss Landry?"

"Yes."

"Did she speak to them? Did they talk English?"

"One of them did. She begged him to give her his name, and he raised his bare arm, showing her the mark of a black arrow."

"It is very strange. Perhaps it may not be long before some things may be explained, that now appear mysterious to you. Although Colonel Landry treats my advice very coldly, I know it to be good advice, and I hope you will cause it to be understood that Miss Rose was brought back by two of Roder's men in disguise."

CHAPTER X.

BLACK ARROW HIMSELF.

THE night after the release of Rose Landry there was a meeting of the vigilance committee. Nat Whetstone was there and Lawrence Satterlee was there. Whetstone was surprised at the presence of Satterlee, as Roder, at his suggestion, had determined that Satterlee should attend no more of the meetings. But Whetstone was a man who could keep his own counsel, and he did not show his surprise by word or look.

It was soon evident that something was going on in which neither Whetstone nor Satterlee was permitted to have a share.

There were private caucuses among the other members, and whisperings between them, in which those two were not invited to participate. Satterlee was nervous and uneasy, and it was plain that he did not like the appearance of affairs; but Whetstone was cool, calm, and quiet as usual.

These two may have noticed that nothing was said aloud that might not have been made known to the world, and almost nothing was done in the way of business, until Captain Ferguson arose, called the meeting to order, and began to speak in low and deliberate tones.

"It has been known," he said, "since the formation of this body, that information of its deliberations, its plans, the names of the gentlemen who compose it, has been regularly conveyed to a set of lawless men whom I feel justified in mentioning as the enemy. While such a state of things lasts, it is impossible for us to act effectively. We will only expose ourselves to danger and humiliation if we do not plan and deliberate with entire secrecy. It has been proposed, in view of these things, that all the members present take a solemn oath of secrecy, which will be hereafter administered to those who are not here present. We will now adjourn to the place that has been selected as the proper spot for administering the oath."

There was no gainsaying this determination, which came in the form of an order, rather than a suggestion. As they walked out of the house, a close observer might have noticed that Satterlee looked anxious and troubled. It would not have required a close observer to perceive that Satterlee and Whetstone were placed in the middle in the order of marching, so that there was no chance for them to lag behind or to drop out. It was evident, in fact, that the proceedings of this meeting had been "cut and dried," that the whole affair was conducted according to a pre-arranged plan.

They walked in perfect silence, a distance of half a mile from the house, to the center of a grove of close timber, where they halted, and ominous preparations were at once made for administering the oath. A rope, with a noose at one end, was thrown over a branch of a large oak. The other end was made fast to the tree, and an empty barrel was placed on end under the noose.

"You see that rope," said Captain Ferguson, pointing at the

tree. "We are about to swear with our necks in the halter, that we have not betrayed any of the secrets of this organization, and that we will hereafter keep them faithfully. If any man swears falsely, I pity him. As the chairman of the committee, I will be the first to take the oath."

With this pithy speech, the captain mounted the barrel, and put his head in the noose, which was tightened around his neck. An oath was then administered to him, in substance such as he had described. No man who had ever disclosed any of the secrets of the organization could take such an oath without forswearing himself.

But Captain Ferguson took it, and then one after another stepped up on the barrel, until the oath had been administered to all except Satterlee and Whetstone.

"It is your turn now," said Ferguson, turning to Satterlee.

That individual trembled and turned pale. He looked around for some way of escape, but saw himself surrounded by earnest and determined men.

"I won't do it," he said, grinding his teeth in rage and vexation. "This is a fixed-up job. I've seen it from the beginning. You want to murder me, and that's the upshot of this whole proceeding."

"If you are a true man," said Captain Ferguson, "you can not object to the oath which we have all taken. If you are a spy, you deserve death."

"I am a gentleman, and I have risked as much in this business as any of you. You can't prove any thing against me, and there is no law for this. Give me a fair trial, and I will submit to the result of it. If you murder me, you will suffer for it."

"It is evident that you are guilty. If we needed any more proof, your conduct gives it to us. Mount that barrel!"

"Will you let me take the oath? I am willing to take it. I can take it as well as any of you."

"What! would you go into eternity with a lie on your lips? You shall have ten minutes to say your prayers. Bind him!"

Satterlee was seized, and his arms were tied behind his back. He saw that his doom was fixed, and he kneeled to his

executicners, beseeching them to spare his life. But he groveled and begged and raved and threatened in vain. He was surrounded by men who were terribly in earnest, who had banded together to free the land from a great plague, to secure the safety of themselves, their families and their property. They believed it to be their duty to make an example of this man, and were determined to perform their duty, cost what it might.

"Your ten minutes are up," said Captain Ferguson, returning his watch to his pocket. "Up on the barrel with him!"

The poor wretch was seized by strong arms, and, in spite of his struggles and shrieks, was raised up on the barrel, and the noose was tightened around his neck. The next instant the barrel was kicked out from under him, and he was swinging in the air.

During this procedure the circle closed about Whetstone, and knives were drawn, and pistols were cocked. But he gave no heed to these preparations, surveying the scene before him with an appearance of entire indifference. His single eye was as unshrinking, and his countenance was as undismayed as ever. A stalwart man, a match for any two of those who surrounded him, he might have broken through their ranks and dashed away. Perhaps the drawn knives and cocked pistols deterred him; but he did not seem to notice them, nor did he show, by look or movement, any desire to stir from the ground on which his feet were planted.

After hanging about twenty minutes, in perfect silence, the body of Satterlee was lowered to the ground, and the noose was carefully removed from his neck. The barrel and the rope were then restored to their former positions.

"Now, sir," said Captain Ferguson, turning to Whetstone.

The person addressed quietly stepped forward, without betraying any emotion, mounted the barrel, and put his head in the noose. This movement created considerable surprise, which found vent in whispers and murmurs; but the guards still closed in around him.

George Warner, who had been regarding his friend in silence, but with great interest, quickly stepped forward.

"He is innocent, Captain Ferguson!" exclaimed Warner. "He is a true man. I will go bail for him with my life."

"Are you ready to take the oath?" asked Ferguson, without heeding the interruption.

"I can't take that oath," replied Whetstone. "I am one of Roder's men, and have told him some matters that have happened at your meetings."

"We know that you have been attending the meetings of the enemy, and that you have been very intimate with Roder. No man can serve two masters; but my young friend, Warner, has thought that you may be able to explain your conduct. Have you any explanation to make?"

"None at all."

"What do you mean?" eagerly asked George Warner, as he again sprung forward. "You don't mean to say that you are a traitor? I would not believe it if you should swear to it. Tell these people the truth, whatever it is. I can not see you die such a death."

"What is the use? I have spoken the truth. I can't take that oath. One death is as good as another. I came here to do something, but am tired already."

George Warner sunk upon his knees, and covered his face with his hands.

"Have you nothing to say," again asked Captain Ferguson, "why you should not suffer the same fate as that rascally spy who lies before you?"

"I have nothing to say; but, as my friend seems to be so badly troubled, I will show you something. I warn him, however, if you let me live he may be sorry for it."

"What have you to show?" asked Ferguson, as George Warner looked up.

Whetstone bared his right arm, and held it up. All could see, in the dim moonlight, a long black arrow printed on the skin, the point toward his hand.

George Warner and Colonel Landry rushed to him and embraced him. In another moment the rope was loosed from his neck, and he was lifted to the ground.

"You are the savior of Rose!" exclaimed Warner. "Why did you not tell us before?"

"I am sorry that you know it now, as I can not expect you to keep my secrets. I showed that mark to save my life, as you were so unwilling that I should die; but it would

have been better for you and for me if the barrel had been pushed from under me."

"What do you mean? I am sure that your death would not benefit me. Why would it have been better for you?"

"There are harder deaths than hanging, as I have good reason to know. One side has had its turn at me, and I may not get off so easy with the other. I feel sure that a bloodhound is on my trail."

"You need not meet those men again. You need not go back among them. Come to Colonel Landry's house. Rose will be so glad to thank you for her life, and there is so much that we wish you to explain."

"But it can not be explained. If I live I will explain it before many days. If I die, it will be better for you. I will thank you if you will let me go now, as I have important business to attend to."

There was nothing to restrain him, except the entreaties of Warner and Colonel Landry, and Whetstone walked swiftly away.

The body of Lawrence Satterlee was again hung up, after a paper had been pinned on its breast, with this inscription:

A SPY.

By order of the Vigilance Committee.

CHAPTER XI.

THE OTHER SIDE.

WHETSTONE was indeed in a hurry when he left his friends of the vigilance committee. He walked away very rapidly, and without stopping to look back; but there was a troubled expression in his face. In fact, he doubted whether he ought to go, and he went quickly, in order that the doubt might be settled in that way.

The important business of which he had spoken was an engagement with Roder's men—an engagement to assist them in attacking and plundering the train of which Roder had

made so much reckoning. He may or may not have believed in presentiments; but he certainly felt one. He was sure that something was about to happen, and it was reasonable that he should forebode evil, rather than expect good. It would be much easier for him to remain with his friends of the vigilance committee, with whom suspicions had given place to gratitude, to receive the thanks of Rose Landry and her parents, to be well entertained and kindly treated, than to risk himself among these outlaws, of whom one at least, he was sure, looked upon him with unfriendly eyes. But he had started to carry out a definite and pre-arranged plan, and he felt that he must go through with it, whatever might be the risk. Besides there were others depending on his movements, and he knew that he ought not to disappoint them. Therefore it was that he walked rapidly away from temptation.

He soon reached his horse, which he had left in the woods near Ferguson's ranch, mounted and rode away at full speed. He rode as if fate was driving him on resistlessly, and to what was he going? He knew not, and his brow clouded as the presentiment of evil again came over him.

His rapid riding brought him, about an hour before day, to the rendezvous at which he was to meet Roder and his men. He found them waiting there—some two dozen of them—waiting patiently and leisurely, as if they had not been anxious concerning his arrival, and had not cared whether he came early or late. Some were sleeping, some were seated idly by the fire, some were putting their arms in order, some were cooking an early breakfast, and nearly all were paying more or less attention to numerous bottles and canteens that were scattered about the encampment.

There was an undefinable something in the appearance of some of those men, in the glances that they cast upon him as he rode up, that made Whetstone hesitate before he dismounted. It might be that the presentiment which had troubled him caused him to put a wrong interpretation upon their demeanor. His hesitation was only momentary; but he took one little measure of precaution before joining his comrades. He did not tie his horse, but threw the bridle over a broken limb, so that it could be easily loosened. He then advanced, with his usual composure, and exchanged greetings with the men.

"Glad to see you at last," said Roder, with something of a sneer. "Better late than never, I suppose. That's the old saying at least."

"I hope I haven't delayed you, or put you back in any of your plans."

"Not a bit of it. Time enough yet, as the man said when they wanted to hang him. We didn't expect to start before daybreak, and one man more or less would make hardly any difference, except in dividing the plunder."

"You may be sure that I will want my share of that."

"So we reckoned, and I hope you may get it. Sit down by the fire, and make yourself comfortable. You will need something warming after riding in the night-air, and here's plenty of the O-be-joyful."

Whetstone could not fail to notice, as he seated himself near the fire, that the men at once commenced to crowd around him, and he soon found himself the center of a circle. All were looking at him and at Roder, in a grim sort of expectancy. But he gave no sign of being discomposed by their proceedings, and quietly took a sip from the black bottle that was handed him.

"As you ought to feel better now," remarked Roder, "we would like to hear what kept you so late, if you've no objection to telling us."

"None in the world. It is my duty to tell you, though it is bad news that I bring. I have been among the regulators again, and have found it a rather serious business."

"Serious, was it? You seem to have come out of it safe enough."

"Yes; but there was another man who was not so lucky. I told you that you had not better send Satterlee among them again, that he wasn't playing the game right, and that he might get into trouble."

"I remember that you spoke about it, and I meant to give him warning, but forgot it. What sort of trouble has he got into?"

"He is in no trouble now, and never will be again in this world."

"You don't mean to say that they have killed him?"

"That is just what I do mean to say. They hanged him to a tree."

"Poor fellow! He was never of much account, and was of mighty little use to us; but he was a friend of ours, and those folks will have to pay for that job. Tell us all about it, Whetstone."

Whetstone described the occurrence quite accurately, and with sufficient detail to satisfy his auditors; but his narrative came to a pause at the death of Satterlee.

"And so they hanged him as a spy," said Roder. "Well, it's no more than we would do if we should catch a spy. What's fair for one is fair for t'other. Don't you think so, Whetstone?"

"I suppose you are right about that. People who put themselves in such a position must take the consequences."

"Of course they must, and they're mighty apt to get them, too. But that won't hinder us from taking our revenge for poor Satterlee. He's not the only one of our friends who has gone under lately, and we've got to be revenged for all of them, on somebody."

"Those regulators seem to be in earnest."

"They had better be; but that won't save them. The cowardly skunks! It is easy enough for them to string up a man when they are twenty to one; but they don't dare to meet us in a fair fight. And so they jerked Satterlee right up to a tree. How did *you* get out of the scrape, Whetstone? You couldn't take that oath, I reckon, without some pretty tall lying."

"But I could do some tall lying to get rid of taking it."

"Didn't they make you take the oath, then?"

"No, indeed. The whole affair was got up for Satterlee's benefit. It was a cut-and-dried arrangement, as he told them. They had suspected and watched him, and they had proof enough against him to satisfy them."

"Don't you suppose that somebody informed against him?"

"Nobody but themselves, as far as I could learn. I told you that he didn't know how to play the game. He only came to the meetings, and neither did nor said any thing. Any one could see that he only came there to look and to listen, and it is no wonder that they suspected him."

"And you were not suspected at all?"

"Oh yes; their suspicions were pretty strong; but I talked

them down, and made all square. They believe that I am one of their best friends and helpers."

"What fools they must be! But you are a powerful hand, Whetstone, to pull the wool over people's eyes. No doubt of that. And you got off safe, and didn't show your hand at all?"

"Show my hand!" exclaimed Whetstone, with a start. "What do you mean by that?"

"You didn't let them know what kind of a game you were playing. What else should I mean?"

"Come, now, cap'n," growled Jim Baker, who had been listening impatiently to this colloquy. "Let's git to business. I'm tired of this durned palaver."

"You had better mind your own business, Jim Baker, and leave me to mind mine," curtly replied Roder. "I reckon I know how to do what I've got afore me."

"So ye ort; but it's a pity we can't do suthin' without so much jaw."

"Hold your own jaw then. I wanted Whetstone to tell me the rights of this affair, and he has done it. Now I've got a little story to tell him, if he cares to hear it."

"A story?" inquired Whetstone.

"Yes—a sort of a yarn. Suppose we take a nip before I begin."

Whetstone took a slight sip from the black bottle, and Roder took a deep draught. The bystanders showed the force of example by applying their lips to their bottles and canteens, with the exception of Baker, who grumbled and muttered impatiently. Roder set down the bottle, and proceeded as follows:

"You see that Jim Baker there. He ain't such a fool as he looks to be. You might take him for a big fool when he is quiet, and for a heap bigger fool when he sets his jaw to runnin'; but you might be everlastin'ly mistaken. You know that our men has been droppin' off lately, in a way that we don't like at all, and a way that we can't understand—unless it may be the ghost; for we are all ready to swear that we saw the ghost, except Jim Baker, who won't believe in the ghost, because he didn't see it himself. But I know for sartin, whatever may happen, that I saw that ghost, and so did Fancy Charley, and so did some of the rest of us."

Jim Baker here showed such violent symptoms of impatience, that Roder invited him to come and "take a nip" with him, to wash down bad feelings, assuring him that he would "come to the p'int" very soon. This business settled, Roder resumed his "little story."

"Ghost or no ghost, the men were dead, and the first thing noticed was, that they had been shot with Comanche arrows. You noticed that, and Jim Baker, who had been among the Comanches, agreed with you; but he went further than you did. He noticed that the arrows were black, and he had heard of a Comanche chief who was named Black Arrow, and who was part white. He made a reg'lar puzzle of it, did Jim, and told me to put it together; but I couldn't make nothin' of it, except that Jim was a fool. I allowed I had laughed him out of his queer notions; but the old hardhead, instead of givin' them up, set in to work them out in his own way. Let's drink to that old hardhead. Talkin' is dry work."

Whetstone felt his presentiment more strongly than ever, and was sure that Roder was about to make some unpleasant disclosure concerning himself; but he showed no emotion, and quietly paid his respects to the bottle.

"What does that old hardhead do," continued Roder, "thinkin' he'd got on the trail, but go, this very night, that's nearly ended now, up to Ferguson's ranch. He hadn't been there long, hidin' about, before he saw a lot of folks come out of the house, and he followed them until they came to a halt in the timber. He sneaked about till he found a good hidin'-place, where he could see all that was goin' on and hear most of it. He told me just what you have told me; so you see I know that you have both been speakin' the truth. Yes, he told what you did, and a little more."

Here the speaker paused, and looked sharply into Whetstone's face. Jim Baker leaned forward, and also gazed inquiringly at the same face. But, if Nat Whetstone felt particularly uncomfortable at that moment, as well he might, his countenance showed no such feeling.

"Well; and what more did Baker tell you?" he asked, speaking as calmly as ever.

"After Satterlee was taken down, another man stepped up on the barrel, and put his head in the noose. He said that

he couldn't take that oath, because he was one of Roder's men, and had told the secrets of the vigilance folks. That was fair and square, and all they had to do then was to ask him if he had anythin' to say ag'inst bein' hung as a spy. He allowed he hadn't; but he concluded at last, though he couldn't say any thin', that he might show somethin'. Then he held up his right arm."

"And what of that?" coolly inquired Whetstone, as Roder paused and looked at him.

"Jim Baker was lookin' close, and there was a streak of moonlight ag'inst the arm just then, and he saw a long black arrow marked on it."

"And what of that?"

"Then the vigilance committee ran up to him, and hugged him, and made a heap of him."

"And what of that?"

"Why, you are the man!"

"Very well. That's no news to me. What does it prove?"

"It proves that you are found out. It proves that you have been a spy ag'inst us all the time, while pretendin' to be a spy for us. It proves that Jim Baker knows now who Black Arrow is, and that we know who killed our men and let that gal loose."

To the astonishment of Roder and Baker, if not all the rest, Nat Whetstone leaned back, and burst into a roar of laughter. But while he was indulging in this untimely mirth, his one eye was busily engaged in seeking a loophole for retreat in case of an emergency.

"I did not think that you could be such a fool, Paul Roder," he said. "To pay Baker for having laughed at his puzzle a while ago, you are now ready to believe the most absurd and monstrous notion he can invent. I will tell you what that thing proves. It proves that I played my part well—so much better than Satterlee played his, that I am alive and free, while he is dead. Did you never before see a man with a mark on his arm? I have seen hundreds of them, and an arrow makes a very nice mark. The Comanches did that for me. Does it follow, because I have an arrow marked on my arm, that I have shot those black arrows through Mart Simpson and the other men? You might as well accuse me, if I

happened to have a wooden leg, of being old Santa Anna. I told you that I had made those regulators believe me to be one of their best friends and helpers, and Baker has only proved that I told you the truth. I did it in my own way, of course. It is no man's business what that way was, as long as it answered the purpose."

There was silence for a few moments after this speech. The boldness of Whetstone and his confident demeanor, raised a doubt in the mind of Roder as to whether the accused was really guilty as charged by Baker. He was staggered, if not convinced. The reasonableness of Whetstone's argument, and the perfect coolness with which he treated the accusation as an utter absurdity, had an effect upon others besides Roder. They were good enough logicians to perceive that the fact of his being marked with a black arrow did not prove that he had killed and scalped the men who had been lost, and that the fact of his being on good terms with the regulators did not prove that he was false to Roder's gang. Not being able to answer his argument, they were silent.

Jim Baker was silent, also, but not because he had nothing to say. He looked around indignantly at the others, noticing their change of opinion in their change of countenance. He was ready to say his say; but his anger mastered his speech for the moment. The accused gave him an opportunity.

"You know that Jim Baker has lots of queer notions," said Whetstone, "and this is one of the queecest he ever invented. I don't see how any man could really believe, for a minute, such a crazy and out-of-the-way notion."

"Crazy is it?" ejaculated Jim Baker, as he rose to his feet. "Any man with half an eye kin see that it's true, in spite of your big talk. You're a powerful hand to pull wool over folk's eyes, as Paul Roder says; but you kain't blind this old hoss. Why did old Landry and that Warner chap run up to you and hug you when you showed the arrer? 'Cause the gal had told 'em who let her loose, and they knowed you to be the man. Yes; and that's jest what the young chap said. I didn't think to tell that afore; but I remember it now. You let the gal loose, and nobody else killed and sculped the man who was left at the hole. I heerd you say that you knowed a bloodhound was on your trail. You war right about that, and

Jim Baker was the hound. Now, ef you ain't Black Arrer, who in — are you?"

"If you are not Sam Houston, who in thunder are you?" replied Whetstone, with equal warmth.

"I am Jim Baker, and I ain't ashamed of my name."

"You are an infernal fool!"

"No rascally spy shall call me that twice!" exclaimed Baker, as he rushed upon Whetstone.

The latter darted forward as he rose to meet his adversary, and caught him around the waist. With a gigantic effort he threw the stalwart backwoodsman clear over his head. But Baker, as he performed his summersault, snatched at his opponent's top-knot, and, to the surprise and consternation of all, the hair came off in a mass, leaving the crown of Whetstone's head as bare as an egg. The loss of his hair made a great transformation in the man, and those who were near him fell back as if a ghost had started up before them.

"BEN BLOOD!" exclaimed Roder and several others.

"I knowed it!" shouted Baker, as he struggled to his feet.

It was not for nothing that Nat Whetstone's single eye had been roving around, seeking a chance to break the circle of which he was the center. He knew the weakest point, and used his knowledge instantaneously. Hardly had Roder exclaimed "Ben Blood!" when he burst through the ring, flinging aside, before they could think of opposing him, two men who stood in his way.

Roder and his men had hardly recovered from their amazement, when the fugitive reached his horse. It was but the work of an instant to slip the bridle, mount, and drive his spurs into the animal's flanks. Crack went half a dozen rifles, and the bullets flew around him as he rode off at a tearing gallop; but he was safe, and was soon so far away that the thought of pursuit was abandoned.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CARAVAN.

A CARAVAN was slowly wending its way across the upper forks of Trinity river. It was not a large caravan, comprising only eight wagons, of which two belonged to emigrants, and the others to traders. Two traders owned the wagons in partnership—John Wilson, from Mississippi, and Tom Bulkley, from nowhere in particular. The emigrants were from Mississippi, and the families were those of Nathan Boyd, with his wife and his son Henry and daughter Miriam, and of Samuel Ryan, with his two grown sons and three daughters. There was a teamster to each of the traders' wagons, making, in all, thirteen men attached to the caravan.

It was a small force with which to traverse the vast wilderness of northern Texas; but no danger was apprehended, except from Indians, and it was believed the rifles of the party would be a sufficient protection against any bands of savages that might be met. Had John Wilson supposed that there could be any real danger, he would have employed more men, and would have paid them out of his own purse, for the sake of Miriam Boyd, whose long black hair was much too precious to ornament the wigwam of a savage.

As the caravan was about to cross the west fork, the last of that series of streams, a solitary horseman came in sight, who was at first supposed to be an Indian, but was recognized as a white man on a nearer view. He rode up to the party without any hesitation or ceremony, announcing his name as Bell Sparks, and his occupation that of a hunter and trapper. Having vouchsafed this information, he proceeded to fraternize with the company in true hunter's style, and was liberally regaled with strong liquors, of which there was abundant store in the wagons.

In return for this hospitality, Bell Sparks opened his stock of knowledge concerning the country and the routes, with which he was thoroughly acquainted, and made himself so use-

ful in helping to cross the wagons over the water, that his entertainers were highly pleased with him, and declared that he was a most valuable acquisition to their party.

It was near sunset when the entire caravan was safe on the other side of the fork, and the leaders began, as usual, to consult concerning a camping-place. Wilson was in favor of a spot on the rolling prairie, clear of timber, about half a mile from the fork, as they had been accustomed to select open and elevated situations, as the best for defense in case of possible attack.

Bell Sparks, however, scouted the idea of danger, and strongly advised his new friends to camp where they were.

"Hyar's yer water," he said, "and hyar's plenty of wood. Thar's no airthly reason why ye should go a mile from wood and water fur a campin'-place. I'll bet a pack of beavers to a coon-skin that ye couldn't find a red-skin within fifty mile. Take the advice of a man who knows this stretch of kentry, and stop whar ye are."

The hunter soon won the greater part of the company to his views, and John Wilson, thinking the matter of not much consequence, easily abandoned his opinion, and it was settled that the camp should be by the river.

Perhaps Wilson would not have yielded the point without a little more argument, if he had not caught sight of Miriam Boyd, strolling alone by the bank of the river, and he was anxious to join her. He acquiesced very readily, therefore, in the opinion of his friends, and hastened to overtake the young lady—for Miriam was still young and handsome, although she had reached the marriageable age nearly ten years before she crossed the west fork of the Trinity.

"Why, John, you frightened me," she said, turning quickly as she heard his step behind her. "Where did you come from?"

"From the wagons, of course. You must have been very busy with your own thoughts, or you would have heard me; for I made noise enough in coming."

"You have come to tell me that they are ready to start, I suppose. It is very kind of you."

"There is nothing to thank me for. The wagons will not start before morning. We are to camp by the river."

"On the low ground? It is strange. You have never chosen such a camping-place before."

"I did not choose it this time, Miriam, and, to tell the truth, I am not half pleased with the selection that has been made. But the hunter who came into camp this evening laughed at the notion of going up onto the prairie, and the other fellows overruled me."

"You don't think it is safe, then, to camp by the river?"

"It is safe enough, I suppose. Sparks says that there are no red-skins anywhere near us, and he ought to know. I don't like it, though, Miriam. I may be foolish; but I think we ought to run no risks. Nearly all I am worth is in this venture, and a great deal more than I am worth rides in one of the wagons."

Miriam blushed; for Wilson had bowed to her, as if his allusion was not sufficiently pointed.

"I suppose you mean me," she said; "but I am not worth your notice. I wish you would not think of me in that way. I wish you could feel toward some one else as you seem to feel toward me."

"Seem, Miriam! You know that I have never loved any but you, and that I can never love any other. But you had walked out here to think of Ben Blood, and you were so wrapped up in your thoughts that you did not hear me when I came up. Will you never forget him? I am not likely to forget him, as long as I bear the mark of his knife; but I owe him no grudge for that. I would not speak to you on this subject again, if I thought that he might be living, that you might yet see him."

"Am I not going to seek him? We will see George Warner, and George will surely have some news of him."

"I pray God, though the prayer goes sorely against the grain with me, that you may find him alive, and that, if he is alive, you may meet no other disappointment."

"What do you mean, John?"

"Nothing; but there are so many chances and changes in this world. I wish you would promise me, Miriam, that you will be my wife if you find that Ben Blood is dead, or if—but no matter about that. I should think you might promise me as much as this."

"Wait till we reach our journey's end. Do not ask me to promise any thing until I have a chance of learning something definite about him. I know you are too generous, John, to press me in this matter now. Hark! my mother is calling me, and it is getting late."

"I won't bother you any more, Miriam. Let us go back to the wagons. The more I think about this camping-place, the more I don't like it. I have a great mind to change it, and let them laugh at me as they will."

Not seeing Bell Sparks about the camp when he returned, John Wilson inquired what had become of him, and was told that he had gone away as soon as the camp was located.

"We pressed him to have supper with us, and to stay all night," said Bulkley; "but he told us that he had a hunting partner waiting for him down the river, and must go to meet him, or his comrade would give him up for dead. So he mounted his mustang, and rode away in a hurry."

Such a proceeding seemed rather strange to Wilson, and he expressed his thoughts. The man had had time enough to drink with them, to help them across the river, and to argue half an hour about a camping-place, and it was strange if he could not stay a little longer. Wilson went on to inform his friends that he did not at all like to camp in the river bottom. The more he thought of it, the more he disliked it, and he wanted them to change the location.

There was some grumbling and dissatisfaction at this request, but Wilson was the leader of the party, and was accustomed to have his own way, and the stranger who had laughed at danger was no longer there.

"There is danger everywhere," said Wilson. "We will never lose any thing by being too particular; but we may lose every thing by not being particular enough. We have always picked a safe place to camp, and there is no reason why we should break our rule now. As we are getting near the end of our journey, we ought to be more careful than ever. It would go hard with us to cross the ocean, and be wrecked in sight of port. There may be no Indians within fifty miles of us; but I knew of a field in Mississippi that no stray cattle ever came near during a whole season, until a gap was left in the fence one night, and the next morning there were a dozen

cows in the corn. I have heard that there are white men in this country, who are as bad as any red-skins, if not worse."

Wilson carried his point, as he usually did when he was in earnest. The cattle were put to the wagons, not without a little grumbling, and the caravan moved on to the prairie. When they reached the spot selected by Wilson, it was night. The wagons were at once corraled, the animals were secured, and guards were set. It was just like John Wilson's obstinacy, the men said, to use more precaution than he had ever yet used, simply because it had been said that there was no danger.

The night wore away without any appearance of danger, and the laugh was against Wilson when he came to take his turn at mounting guard. Many were the jokes and gibes of the relieved sentinels, who were jolly at the prospect of wrapping themselves in their blankets and enjoying a comfortable snooze.

"Laugh as much as you please," said Wilson. "I don't care what fun you poke at me, as long as we are safe. I had rather be laughed at than lose my wagons. We have come so far in perfect safety, and I am not fool enough to risk anything at the last."

The night was clear and bright after the moon rose. It was profoundly quiet, and ears, as well as eyes, could reach far on such a night; but there was nothing to be seen or heard outside of the camp, and it was not such a night as savages would choose for an attack.

John Wilson walked around the camp, or leaned against a wagon, thinking of Miriam Boyd, and hoping that he might yet win her. He was glad that his precautions had proved unnecessary, but did not regret that he had taken them.

Were they, indeed, unnecessary? Wilson's meditations were interrupted by the whinnying of a horse in the direction of the river. He heard it again and again—there was more than one horse. He laid his ear to the ground, and could hear the stamping of horses and the voices of men. The noises were at their first camp, near the river-bank. A party was there, and it was probable that they were enemies. Whether enemies or friends, it was necessary to be prepared for the worst.

Calling one of the sentinels, Wilson told him of what he had heard, and directed him to quietly waken the camp. In a few minutes all the men were on their feet, with their rifles in their hands, and were posted in concealment behind the wagons, ready to give a warm reception to an enemy.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHITE AND RED INDIANS.

HARDLY were the preparations for defense completed, when a body of horsemen came in sight, approaching the camp from the river. A nearer view showed that they were white men.

"They are at least two to our one," said Wilson. "We shall have a hard tussle."

"What do you mean?" asked Tom Bulkley. "Don't you see that they are white men? Of course they are friends."

"That don't follow."

"You are the most suspicious man I ever knew. Any one but you would be sure that they are friends."

"I tell you, Tom, there are white men in these parts who are wilder and worse than any red-skins."

"There is Bill Sparks, our hunter friend, among them. Don't you recognize him?"

"Well enough. He had his own reasons, no doubt, for wanting us to camp down yonder. See! they have broke into a trot. They are going to charge us."

"You are going crazy, John."

As soon as the party were near enough, John Wilson rose and hailed them.

"Keep off, till you tell us who you are! Halt, there, or we will fire into you!"

He was answered by a volley—not of bullets, but of oaths—and the horsemen pressed forward at a gallop.

"You see what they are now, Tom Bulkley. Take good aim, boys, and leave that rascally Sparks for me."

Wilson's friends still found it hard to believe that he was

right, until a couple of shots were discharged at their leader, who was the only person visible from beyond the camp. Then they took good aim, and a stream of fire was poured forth from behind the wagons.

The fire caused no little destruction, not among the men, but among the horses. Bill Sparks was knocked off his horse, and one or two more were wounded; but it was the havoc among the horses, caused by the low aim of those behind the wagons, that made the charge a failure. So many animals were down, or careering about without their riders, that they were in the way of those who were still mounted. The advance was stopped, and the assailants were glad to get out of reach of another volley.

"Now you can see, boys, what white Indians are," said Wilson. "That fellow Sparks was a spy. It was his business to see our strength, and to put us on a camping-ground where they would have a good chance at us. They expected to find us down yonder, and were as mad as rattlers when they came up here at us."

"They got a pretty good dose," remarked Henry Boyd.

"Not enough to cure them. That spy is settled, I think; but the others are likely to give us as much trouble as we can stand up under."

Wilson was right, as usual. These white Indians went to work in much the same manner as red Indians were accustomed to. They had hoped to surprise the camp, or to take it at a disadvantage. Disappointed in this, they had attempted a grand rush, which had resulted in failure. As the red Indians would have done, they then attacked on all sides, concealing themselves behind such cover as they could find.

This was a game at which both sides could play. Those in the camp were sheltered by their wagons, and by bales of goods and other articles, of which they had made a breast-work; while their assailants had only the inequalities of the ground and the little holes that they scraped in the soft prairie soil; but the latter advanced steadily, and their fire was quite galling, especially as it was concentrated upon the camp from all directions.

It was not long before one of the teamsters was killed, Wilson was hit in the leg, and two others were slightly wounded.

Still the white Indians gradually approached the camp, and affairs began to look blue for its defenders. While matters were in this condition, the attack seemed to be gradually concentrated on the side next to the river, and the wagoners gradually concentrated there to meet it. Then it was that John Wilson, who had just bound up his leg, called to his friends to hasten to the other side, as the real attack was about to be made at that point.

Over they went, pell-mell, leaving but three or four to answer the fire of the enemy on the slope. Sure enough, a dozen men were riding toward the camp as fast as their horses could carry them. To the astonishment of those who had hurried to meet them, a few rifle-shots were sufficient to send these bold riders to the right about, and they went off without a wound.

John Wilson was wrong, for once. The attack of the horsemen was only a feint. He had hardly finished wondering at the easy rout of the enemy, when the cries of his companions on the other side told him that the men on the slope had burst into the camp. All hastened to drive them out, and the struggle was a hard one, though finally successful. The assailants were driven out, bearing off all their wounded, except one man, who had crawled under a wagon.

This temporary victory was dearly purchased by the defenders of the camp. Six of them were down, including Wilson, who had received a much more serious wound than that in his leg. He was carried to a place of comparative safety, and his wound was looked to by Miriam Boyd, all the men being needed for fighting.

"Bad enough, Miriam," he said, in answer to her question concerning his wound. "I am afraid that we will never get away from here alive. It is not likely that I will, and I am fearful for the rest of you. Those wretches want our plunder, and mean to have it. I would wish it all sunk in the sea, if your life might be spared. We can never stand another rush like that. Are they coming again?"

"Never mind them now. Let me first attend to your wound."

"Look, Miriam! I must know whether they are coming."

"Yes! The horsemen are coming on again. No! These are not the same. I am sure they are not. Is it possible that they are Indians? Ah! what a fearful cry!"

"It is the war-whoop. Lift me up, Miriam, and let me see them. They are Indians, and there must be more than twenty of them. We are between hawk and buzzard now, and I wish the two birds of prey would end it by killing each other. Let me down. I am too weak to sit up."

"They are running!" exclaimed Miriam. "The white men are running. The savages have charged upon them, and are chasing them in all directions."

This intelligence was confirmed by Henry Boyd, who came running up to tell his leader what had happened, and to wonder, as the others wondered, what they were to do.

"We can only trust in Providence," replied Wilson. "Look out, and tell me all that is going on."

It was a rout of the white savages by the red savages, and the former, as Miriam had said, were being driven in all directions. Soon a warrior separated himself from the Indians, and rode up to the camp.

"Don't shoot!" he shouted, as Tom Bulkley's rifle was pointed at him. "Don't you see that we are your friends, that we have driven off your enemies? I am a white man, as well as you."

Bulkley lowered his weapon, and welcomed this deliverer into the camp. He was at once taken to John Wilson, who was nearly fainting from loss of blood.

"They tell me that you are a white man," said Wilson. "Are these other Indians white men, too?"

"They are genuine Comanches; but they have come to help you against those white savages who have nearly made an end of you here."

"White or red, you have saved us, and you will find that we are grateful."

"Never mind that now. Let me look at this wound of yours."

"Tell me your name, then."

"You may call me Black Arrow."

Black Arrow dressed Wilson's wound in good style, and hastened to assist the other men who had been hurt. In the

mean time the Comanches returned from pursuing the white fugitives, and were heartily welcomed to the camp. Tom Bulkley treated them freely to liquors, and distributed cheap presents among them quite liberally. In fact, the red warriors were lionized and made much of, although dripping scalps were hanging from the belts of some of them. Their entertainers did not object to the scalps, so long as they were the scalps of their enemies.

Black Arrow showed no little emotion while he was moving about the camp, succoring the wounded and dressing their hurts. He often looked at Miriam Boyd; but it must have been the painful wounds, not her sweet face, that troubled him so much. One of the assailants who had been wounded was dragged out from under a wagon, and the attention of the impromptu surgeon was called to him. As Black Arrow looked at this man, there was a savage expression on his features.

"Hallo! You hyar!" exclaimed the wounded man. "You've got me now, and I reckon you'll be fur raisin' my ha'r."

"I will dress your wound first, Jim Baker."

The chief suited the action to the word, giving the guilty as much care as he had given the innocent, and not a word was spoken between them until the operation was performed.

"You are a queer cuss," then said Baker. "I kain't rightly make you out; but I reckon I kin guess yer notion. You want to save me for the tortur'."

"Would that be any worse than you treated me?"

"Don't know as it would. But I mought tell you suthin' you would like to know. It's about the Landry folks."

"What about them? Are they in danger?"

"Reckon they are. I will tell you, ef you promise to see me safe out of this scrape, so that I kin try to lead a better life."

"I will promise, if you will speak the truth; but you must also promise not to mention my name to any one here."

"It was agreed among us to take our revenge out of old Landry and his folks. Charley St. Clair put us up to it; but Roder and the rest were willin' enough. As soon as this job could be got over—whether it worked well or not—they war goin' over to March's Settlement to raise partic'lar thunder.

They allowed that this kentry is growin' too hot fur 'em, and they meant to take that gal of Landry's fur Charley, and to cl'ar out with what plunder they kin git holt of. I make no doubt that they're on the way now."

Black Arrow stopped only to look at John Wilson, who was sinking rapidly, and to speak a few words to Bulkley, who had taken his partner's place as leader of the caravan. Then he collected his red warriors and rode off at full speed.

CHAPTER XIV.

READY TO STRIKE.

THE vigilance committee had not been idle after the execution of Lawrence Satterlee. George Warner, with his accustomed impetuosity, urged them to do something, declaring that they never would be more ready to strike than they were.

If they should not combine and attack the enemy, the enemy would be sure to attack them at some moment when they could not combine.

Even Colonel Landry was convinced that timid counsels ought no longer to prevail, and preparations were at once made for war. Warrants were procured against certain persons who were known to have committed crimes, and the entire force of the vigilance committee set forth, in strong array, as a *posse comitatus*, to execute the warrants. To their great surprise, when they reached the settlement the birds had flown. Neither Paul Roder, nor any man who could be suspected of being connected with him, was to be found there, and the grand movement of the regulators was necessarily a failure.

As there could be no battle without an enemy, the army valiantly marched back to Colonel Landry's, where they were regaled with a good dinner, and a council of war was held. It was unanimously agreed that nothing could be done until the whereabouts of Roder and his men could be ascertained, and the men gradually dropped off and returned to their respective homes, with the exception of a few who chose to remain as the guests of Colonel Landry.

It was just at sunset that Rose, who was sitting at a window, looking at the blaze of glory in which the sun was going down, descried a body of horsemen approaching from the north-west. Wondering who could be coming from that direction, toward the rear of the house, she watched them closely, and soon discovered that they were Indians.

She hastened to give the alarm, which brought all in the house to look at the horsemen, and it was considered certain that they were Indians, unless they might be Roder's men in disguise. At all events they must be enemies, and preparations were at once made to receive them as such.

There were six fighting-men in the house, including the negroes, and there were just arms enough in the house for those six, including two shot-guns. But those six could make but a poor defense against twenty men, and the house was so built that it was not easy of defense. It was no wonder that the men looked blank at the prospect before them, although they handled their weapons resolutely, and took their stations with alacrity.

"Perhaps one of them may have a black arrow on his arm," suggested Rose, to whom this bright idea had suddenly presented itself.

"You are a little goose," replied Warner. "It was no Indian who rescued you. It was Nat Whetstone."

"But he looked as much like an Indian as any of those, and I am sure it was an Indian who was with him. Whetstone called him Ne-cum-wa, as I remember well, and you know that that is not a white man's name."

"It will be a strange thing if you are right. In fact, this is a strange business at the best, and I must confess that I can't see through it."

"For my part, I don't feel the least bit afraid."

There was no chance for any further speculation, as the Indians stopped as soon as they came within rifle range of the house, and one of them rode forward alone.

Of course no one was going to fire at this solitary horseman, and he came unmolested to the house, where it was soon proved that Rose's supposition was correct.

"Where do you come from, and who are those men?" hastily inquired George Warner.

"They are my friends and yours," replied Whetstone. "This house is to be attacked, and I am surprised that the attack has not been made already."

"Who is to attack us?"

"I have no time to answer questions. Let me bring in my men, if you want our help. We have been riding hard since daylight, to get ahead of those people, and our horses are broke down."

One or two men wanted to parley before admitting a crowd of savages to the house; but George Warner's impetuosity overcame all opposition, and he at once directed Whetstone to bring up his allies. They came at the sound of his whistle, and eagerly filed into the house, after securing their horses in the outbuilding.

Rose was not a little frightened by their painted faces, their fierce looks and gestures, and their eager, hungry eyes, that seemed anxious to eat up every thing on the place; although they were only betraying a curiosity which they could not help, and which would show itself through their stolid demeanor.

It was strange, indeed, to see those savages brought into the house of a white man, to defend him against the attack of other white men, and many comments were made upon such an anomalous condition of affairs; but Whetstone had no time to listen to comments or to give explanations. He mentioned, as hastily as possible, the attack upon the caravan, and the manner in which he had learned that Colonel Landry's house was to be assailed, and suggested that no time should be lost in getting assistance. His suggestions were at once adopted. Two men were sent out, on swift horses, to inform the members of the vigilance committee of the expected attack, and sentinels were posted in positions that commanded the best view, to give timely notice of the approach of the expected marauders.

In the mean time Mrs. Landry and her servants were busily engaged in preparing a meal to satisfy the appetites of their strange defenders, who ate with such avidity when it was set before them, as to put in the shade all previous performances in mastication that she had seen.

While his warriors were feeding, Whetstone was pressed to

give an account of his recent adventures, and to explain how he became connected with the Comanches; but his questioners did not succeed in eliciting much information, except in relation to the attack upon the caravan, which he described with more minuteness than was necessary.

When he had finished his account, there was a new excitement in the house, caused by the arrival of a man from the settlement, who stated that Paul Roder was there with a large crowd of men, some of whom were wounded, and all of whom were drinking and noisily declaring that they intended to "clean out" Colonel Landry's plantation and kill all who were connected with the vigilance committee. He had slipped away in the midst of the uproar, and had hastened to the house to give the occupants warning.

Thankful for this timely notice, Whetstone and his friends lost no time in making preparations to meet the desperate marauders, hoping to find an easy task in defeating them, after their hard usage in the attack on the caravan and their hard drinking at the settlement. Their hopes were still further raised by the arrival of the men from Ferguson's ranch and an adjoining plantation, who hastened to Colonel Landry's as soon as they were informed of the threatened attack.

Captain Ferguson took command, as chairman of the vigilance committee, and placed Whetstone and his Indians in concealment behind the fence in front of the house, with instructions that they were to maintain perfect silence, and not to fire a gun until the enemy should be right upon them. After delivering their fire, they would remain where they were, or retreat to the house, as Whetstone should deem best. The white men and the negroes who had arms were stationed in the shrubbery, on each flank of their red allies.

While these preparations were being made at Colonel Landry's house, Roder and his men were advancing from March's Settlement in a very disorderly manner.

When they reached the settlement, on their return from their disastrous expedition, there were plenty to tell them of the grand attempt and failure of the vigilance committee. This intelligence, coming at a time when they were in a very bad humor, made them angry enough, although they laughed heartily at their foes, and vowed that the vigilants would never

have thought of coming to look for them, if it had not been well known that they were absent from the settlement. However, it was an insult that should not go unpunished, and they were more set than ever in their determination to go to Colonel Landry's plantation and "clean it out."

St. Clair, who was expected to be the chief gainer by the raid, threw open his "saloon" to his friends, determined that they should not lack artificial courage to spur them up to the undertaking. They were informed by the loafers who assisted them to dispose of the free whisky that the vigilants had separated and gone to their homes, leaving them, as they believed, a fair field for their operations.

Roder and his men all drank entirely too much of St. Clair's free whisky. They were greatly mortified and exasperated by their recent defeat. They had lost many of their comrades, and it was plain to most of them, notwithstanding their laughing and boasting, that a longer stay in that section of country would not be healthy for them. They were determined to strike one more blow, for revenge, before trying the effect of a change of air. Therefore it was that they prolonged their carouse until some of them hardly knew, when they set out for Colonel Landry's plantation, whether they were walking on their heads or on their feet.

Roder made some efforts to keep order among his boisterous followers, but soon abandoned them as useless, and the Bacchanalian crowd struggled on in the noisiest and most disorderly manner.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BLOW.

THERE were lights in Colonel Landry's windows when Roder and his men came in sight of the house. It was yet early, and the lights indicated that the family were at home, and had not yet retired for the night. There was a profound stillness about the place, and it seemed to Roder, who had succeeded in quieting his followers, that every thing favored his purpose.

They had nearly reached the fence, and were only about fifty yards from the house, when Roder stopped them and explained his plan. It was simple enough—after entering the gate they were to divide and surround the house.

“Come on, boys! The game is in our own hands,” said St. Clair, as he laid his hands on the gate.

His words gave the signal for his death. Hardly had he spoken, when a dark line of men rose up behind the fence, and the fire of more than two dozen rifles was poured into that huddled mass of men.

The effect of such a fire, at such close range, was terrible—it was murderous. It seemed that it must sweep Roder's gang at once into eternity, and it was near doing so. As an organization—a reckless, desperate organization of outlaws—Roder's gang no longer existed. There were a number of men lying on the ground, some of them motionless, and others writhing and groaning. The few who were left on their feet were as much paralyzed by this sudden blow as if they had themselves been shot.

They were not permitted to remain more than a moment in that position. A terrific yell aroused them from their stupor—such a yell as they had lately heard issuing from the same throats—a yell that lent to their feet the speed of fear—the war-whoop of the Comanches.

“That wretch is here with his red-skins!” exclaimed Roder, as the dark figures threw themselves over the fence, to finish their work with tomahawks and knives.

He dropped his gun, and turned to fly; but he had gone only a few steps when he was knocked down by a tomahawk.

The savages, like wolves who have tasted blood, rushed on in pursuit of the fugitives. No one sought to stop them—no one tried to hinder them when they coolly appropriated the scalps of the fallen victims. Roder and his men had so long been the terror of the neighborhood, that there were none to object to any means by which they might be swept from the face of the earth. They had come on a criminal errand, and it was fitting that they should then and there receive the punishment due to their crimes. Worse than savages, it was just that they should die by the hands of savages.

Some of the white men, perhaps, would have listened to

the cries for mercy of their terror-stricken enemies; but they kept in the background after the first murderous fire, leaving the work of extermination to their red allies. The result was that but two or three escaped to tell the tale (if they ever chose to tell it) of the destruction of Roder's gang, and not one of them was ever again seen near March's Settlement. A large section of country, by one terrible and sweeping act of vengeance, was cleared of outlaws and brought under the control of order.

Nat Whetstone stopped a tall warrior as he was stooping to take the scalp of a man who was yet living.

"I claim this man, Ne-cum wa," he said. "Let my brother leave him to me."

The chief nodded to his friend, and uttered his war-cry as he bounded away in pursuit of another victim.

Whetstone called for help, and carried the man, who was no other than Paul Roder, into the house, where he was laid on the floor insensible, but still breathing.

In the course of time the red warriors returned from the pursuit, and came to the house with dripping scalps in their belts. Their ensanguined appearance frightened Rose Landry and her mother, as well as the servants; but these savages had saved them, in all probability, from a great calamity, and gratitude compelled them to conceal their disgust.

"What shall we do with these Indians?" asked Mrs. Landry, who could not help shuddering as she looked at them.

"I see nothing for it, madam, but to give them something to eat and drink," replied Whetstone, as the good lady bustled about to provide creature comforts for these frightful friends.

A number of members of the vigilance committee, who had been notified by the two couriers, had arrived by this time, and were greatly astonished to learn that their work had been done, as well as to see the strong allies by whose aid it had been accomplished. They overwhelmed Whetstone with praise and thanks, and strongly insisted that he should tell them how he had become connected with the Comanches, and how he had succeeded in bringing them so far from their own country on such an errand.

"You do really owe us an explanation," said George Warner. "There are several points about this affair that I can not

possibly understand, and I will not be satisfied unless you clear them up. You know that we are your friends, and I am sure you have nothing to tell that would make us unfriendly."

Rose insisted upon an explanation, also, protesting that she had a right to know all about her preserver, and Whetstone, with a troubled look, supposed that he would be obliged to comply with their wishes.

"But you owe me no thanks," he said. "What I have done was to serve my own ends. It is Ne-cum-wa who brought his warriors to help you. I am a Comanche, too; but I am a small chief, while Ne-cum-wa is a great chief."

"Black Arrow is my brother," said Ne-cum-wa, whose words his friend was obliged to translate. "He saved the life of Ne-cum-wa, and his brother is always ready to help him."

"But Ne-cum-wa's people saved my life," added Whetstone, "and I only paid them what I owed them."

"*Ben Blood!*"

It was Paul Roder who spoke. He had recovered his senses, had raised himself on his arm, and was glaring wildly about the room.

"What do you want?" asked Warner. "Whom are you calling?"

"Nat Whetstone, Black Arrow, or whatever you may call him. Ben Blood is his name, and I want him to come here."

Ben Blood stepped up to where the wounded outlaw was lying, and looked at him rather compassionately.

"You've got me at last," said Roder, "and much good may it do you. It was you, then, and not your ghost, who came to the cabin and asked for your scalp?"

"It was no ghost."

"And it was you who put the black arrows into our men, and turned loose that gal. I don't blame you; but I wish I had found you out a little sooner. I reckon you're satisfied now, and you're welcome to that sculp."

Those were the last words that Paul Roder spoke. The Comanches, by Whetstone's direction, carried the body out of the house, and it might have been noticed that one of them soon had a fresh scalp at his belt.

George Warner was overjoyed. "I have found my brother," he said, as he took Ben's hand in both of his, "and I will try

to keep him now, for our mother's sake, if not for his own I knew there was something, Ben, that drew me to you when I met you at the settlement, and I felt that I could trust you, when some of our friends were suspicious. But I don't understand what Roder meant when he said that you had come and asked for your scalp. I noticed once—the night you slept here—that you—can it be possible?"

"Did you notice that I had no scalp? Roder's men had it, and it is no wonder that they thought my ghost had come to claim it. It is a long story, and too painful for Miss Rose to hear; but you may know more about it some day. They took my scalp, and left me to die. The scalp is now nailed to the wall in my old hut in the timber; but I lived without it. I don't know how it was that I lived; I don't know any thing that happened for a long time; but I know that I was miles from that place when I woke up and found a lot of red-skins around me, some of Ne-cum-wa's people. They couldn't take my scalp, as there was none for them to take; but they might have left me to die. I don't know why it was that they took care of me. It was like my living after what I had gone through with, I reckon—one of those strange things that *will* happen sometimes, just to make people wonder. But they did take care of me, and carried me to their lodges. Some of their women-folks nursed me, and I got well and strong. I was a sort of a slave among them for a while; but I happened to save the life of Ne-cum-wa, one of their chiefs, and then I got a chance to show what I could do. They took a liking to me, and I became a chief—a little chief—not a big chief like Ne-cum wa.

"Perhaps it was because of living with those wild and revengeful people—perhaps it was just the old Adam that I used to hear the preachers talk about—anyhow, I got to longing to come down here and take my revenge out of the men who had served me so. I thought about it until I had every thing planned out, and it looked easy. All I needed was help, and Ne-cum-wa was ready to follow me wherever I wanted to go. We took twenty warriors, and hid them in a place that I knew of, while I looked about and did a little work on my own hook. I must confess that the warriors were getting right impatient, and they would have left me, I believe, except Ne-cum-

wa, if I hadn't given them a chance to take some scalps. That affair of the train came off just in time, and this work followed it. I reckon they are pretty well satisfied, and that they will do some tall bragging over their white scalps when they get back to their people. But they came mighty near missing those chances, when I put my head into the noose over at Captain Ferguson's!"

"Why did you do that?" asked George. "I do believe you would have let them hang you, if I hadn't begged you so hard."

"Life was worth nothing to me just then, George. I had had enough of revenge, and was sick of it. It wasn't near as sweet a mess as I had thought it would be, when I was off among the Comanches. Then, again, I was sure, if I lived, I would have to tell you before long who I was, and I didn't want to do that."

"Why not?"

"Because— hark! Don't you hear wagons?"

Yes; George heard wagons, and others heard them, and in a few moments the train that had been attacked by Roder's men came rumbling up in front of the house.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

THE few words that Black Arrow, or Ben Blood, had stopped to speak to Tom Bulkley, before he hastened away from the caravan, were concerning the intelligence that Jim Baker had just communicated to him. He also gave the direction and distance of March's Settlement and Colonel Landry's plantation.

Bulkley, who was always ready to help those who helped him, and who was anxious to reach the very place that had been described to him, put his cattle to the wagons, and started westward as soon as the condition of his wounded friends would allow.

But ox teams travel slowly, and the day was past, and the

night was far advanced, when he came in sight of March's Settlement. Not caring to stop at that small collection of shanties, the train pressed on in the light of the newly risen moon, until it reached Colonel Landry's house.

Ben Blood showed such strange emotion when he learned that the caravan had arrived, that his half-brother could not help taking him aside and asking him what was the matter.

"There is one thing I haven't told you," replied Ben "Miriam Boyd is with those wagons—she and John Wilson. They are married, I suppose. He was badly wounded, and she was holding his head when I left them."

"It don't follow from that that they are married. Suppose they are married; why should it trouble you? Do you still care for Miriam?"

"Care for her! I have never loved any woman but her, and I can't tell you how much I have always loved her. But she hates me, and she has good reason to hate me."

"Why should she hate you?"

"Because I behaved so shamefully when I stabbed John Wilson and ran away. It is no wonder that she married him."

"If she hates you, she has lately learnt how, and I don't believe that she has married John Wilson. He made her an offer of marriage before I left the State; but she declined it, and he told her that he would leave the offer open. There never was a better fellow than Wilson."

"True enough, and I have been such a vagabond. I don't want her to know that I am alive. I am ashamed to be seen by her."

"It will be hard to keep her from knowing that you are alive. There will be plenty to tell her, if I could lie about it. She will ask me about you as soon as she sees me. The last words she spoke, when I left the State, were to charge me to make inquiries about you."

"They are coming in. There she is, George, at the door."

Tom Bulkley and his friends received a warm greeting at Colonel Landry's. George Warner, who was acquainted with most of them, hastened to bring them into the house, where they were soon made comfortable. They were not surprised

at the sight of the red-men, as they had expected to meet them here.

Three wounded men were brought in, and were at once provided with beds and attention.

"Are there no more?" asked Warner, as he came into the room after seeing that this business was properly attended to. "Where is John Wilson? I heard that he was badly wounded."

"He was very badly wounded," replied Miriam Boyd. "He died at noon. We are to bury him to-morrow, and it will be the saddest funeral I ever attended."

"He was a good man."

"He was a very good man. There are few who know how good he was. I never felt it, myself, until now. His death so overcomes me that I can think of nothing else."

She burst into a flood of tears, which put an end to conversation, and Mrs. Landry, declaring that her guests must be tired to death, hurried Miriam off to bed with the other women.

As for the men, there was not sleeping room for them all, and there were few of them, if any, who cared to sleep. The recent exciting events furnished abundant food for talk, and served to keep them thoroughly awake until morning, for which they had not long to wait.

"Did you notice how she was troubled at the death of John Wilson?" asked Ben Blood of George Warner.

"Who? Miriam Boyd? Yes; I noticed that. It was natural that she should feel sorry."

"Of course a woman will be sorry for the death of the man she loves, and she must have loved Wilson, whether he was her husband or not. You were sure that she would ask about me as soon as she saw you; but she did not mention my name."

"You heard her say that Wilson's death troubled her so that she could think of nothing else."

"I heard that well enough, and I know what it means. Ne cum-wa will go to the north in the morning, and I will go with him."

"You will do no such thing. I thought you were a brave man, but you seem to be a coward. You will go up-stairs,

and wash the paint off your face, and put on some of my clothes, and make yourself look like a white man."

"What's the use? With my scalp gone, and an eye out, she would hate to look at me."

Nevertheless, Ben grumbly obeyed his half-brother, and it must be confessed that he took no little pains with his personal appearance.

In the morning Miriam Boyd was visible at an early hour, notwithstanding the excitement and fatigue she had undergone. She at once sought George Warner, and had hardly bid him good-morning, when she began to make inquiries concerning Ben Blood.

"I have learned all about him," replied George. "I was bound to do so, on my own account, as well on yours. More than two years ago he fell a victim to the same gang of outlaws that attacked your train and this house."

"They murdered him?"

"They meant to do so, no doubt. They treated him with the greatest cruelty, and finished their work by depriving him of an eye and taking his scalp. They left him to die; but he lived, and ultimately fell into the hands of the Comanche Indians, who treated him kindly, and he became a chief among them."

"Were not those Comanche Indians who helped us when we were attacked—the same who are here now? The chief speaks the English language, and he seems to be a kind man, although he is so ugly. Perhaps he can tell me something of Ben."

"I do believe that he has been standing at the door listening to us. See! he has dressed himself like a white man."

Ben Blood came forward in a hesitating manner, and held out his hands.

"Miriam!" he said, and she was in his arms. She had been true to him, during years of absence, and she was not likely to throw him off now.

George Warner left them there, and went in search of Rose. John Wilson was buried the next day, and there had been no funeral in that country at which there were truer mourners. On their return from the funeral, Ben Blood and Miriam, with their friends, were seated in Colonel Landry's house. The

greater part of the guests had left, and the Indians were "camped" on the plantation.

"I want to know, Ben," said George, "what is to become of the Comanches. Ne-cum-wa expects you to return with him."

"I must," replied Ben, as his countenance suddenly fell. "I promised him, and you know what an Indian is."

"Perhaps he can be bought off," suggested Bulkley. "Give him lots of presents."

"I have no presents to give him."

"You have plenty—wagon-loads of them. John Wilson left a will with me. He had no relations, and he gives all his property to Miriam. What is hers is yours, I suppose, or soon will be. Shall I take the responsibility, Miriam?"

Miriam gladly assented. Tom went to the wagons, and the Comanches were sent away rejoicing, although Ne-cum-wa exhibited more grief at parting with Black Arrow, than any one, except Ben Blood, would have given him credit for.

When this matter was settled, George Warner had another question ready for Ben.

"I want to know what you meant," he asked, "at a certain time when you had been standing on a barrel, by saying that it would have been better for you and for me if the barrel had been pushed from under you. Why would it have been better for me?"

"Because, if I had died, you would have had my mother's property."

"I have enough without it."

Ben had enough, too. In due course of time he was married to Miriam Boyd, and became the proprietor of a large stock farm. George Warner married Rose Landry, and was one of the most extensive traders in northern Texas. Both were prosperous in their business and family relations. March's Settlement grew and flourished, and the days of outlaws were over. Charley St. Clair escaped to Galveston, where dissipation soon made an end of him; but Jim Baker was resolute in his determination to lead a new life, and became a quiet and respected citizen.

THE END.

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